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**Commenting on “Quality”**

**An Analysis of *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Parenthood* as**

**Socially Constructed Tenants of the “Quality TV” Discourse**

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**by**

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## **Dedication**

To my family – Mom, Dad, Bonnie (my most trusted editor) and Brenda. Thank you for always pushing me, supporting me, making me laugh and inspiring me to work hard. This document, and everything it has brought me, simply would not exist without you.

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## **Abstract**

### **Commenting on “Quality”**

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Brittany Lee Shelton, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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In order to better understand how viewers, critics, journalists and series producers help shape the “quality TV” discourse and position shows within it, this project uses case studies of *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Parenthood* to dissect how style, narrative and paratexts influence public discourse about “quality” programs both in print and on the Internet. Using Kristen Marthe Lentz’s theories on “quality TV” and “relevance programming,” I examine how each show uses a cinematic style in combination with various strategies such as special episodes, narrative complexity, intertextuality, patriarchal narrative and feminism to align themselves with other “quality” series more readily found on basic and pay-cable, while also allowing viewers and critics on popular culture sites like the *A.V. Club* to make “quality” comparisons.

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## Introduction

On April 4, 2011, the cover of *TV Guide* boldly featured a lead story entitled “7 Shows You *Need* To Watch.” The word “Need” is made distinct by a bright shade of red as opposed to the rest of the title displayed in a dark blue font. One of the shows featured on this list as a must-watch for “fans of great TV” is *Parenthood* (2010-present), showrunner Jason Katims’ family “dramedy” that airs Tuesday nights on NBC and stars Lauren Graham, Peter Krause and Craig T. Nelson. According to the magazine, *Parenthood* succeeds as great TV because of its ability to make us “laugh, cry and, most importantly, care” (24), something that pushed those behind the magazine to champion its worth amongst a sea of other top-notch programming. *Justified* (2010-present), *Community* (2009-present), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), *The Good Wife* (2009-present), *Fringe* (2008-present) and *Nikita* (2010) are the other six shows on the list. Clearly, *TV Guide* considers *Parenthood* “quality” fare worth tuning in for, but how do the creators and writers of shows such as *Parenthood* position or construct their series to be read as “quality”? Two other shows currently airing on NBC, the sitcoms *30 Rock* (2006-present) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-present), also are regularly cited in discussions of “quality TV.” This discourse is forwarded by critics, viewers, award show honors and the press in magazines such as *Entertainment Weekly*, in trades like *Variety* and on pop culture websites such as the *A.V. Club*. However, rather than being touted for their “authentic” and affective representations of family as well as their naturalistic



shooting style like *Parenthood*, *30 Rock* is acclaimed for its smart dialogue, incessant intertextuality and single-camera shooting style while *Parks and Recreation* is praised for its expertly-drawn characters and setting. Therefore, in what divergent and overlapping ways do these series' creators utilize form and narrative to position their shows within the multi-faceted discourse of "quality TV," and how do critics and viewers decode these texts in order to position, reaffirm or even renounce these series as "quality"?

In order to understand how *30 Rock*, *Parenthood* and *Parks and Recreation* inhabit and inflect the "quality TV" discourse, it is necessary to consider how other scholars have studied the nature of "quality TV" and work in conversation with my ultimate research question and project. For many, the beginning of "quality TV" research and the definition of the term "quality" is the MTM production *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), which was written about extensively as "quality TV" by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi. In *MTM: Quality Television*, these authors point out that *Mary Tyler Moore's* success was a direct result of CBS' shift from a general emphasis on ratings to an emphasis on demographics or "directing television shows toward specific audience groups" (3). The idea and support of "quality" or elite demographics, therefore, allowed a show like *Mary Tyler Moore*, which was an amalgamation of both more traditional and innovative television forms, to inspire viewership and an "odd assortment of opinions" as to its status as a new kind of "quality" and "relevant" programming (Feuer, "MTM Enterprises" 5).

In the same way, Julie D'Acci points out in *Defining Women* that *Cagney & Lacey*, another "quality" series that focused on females in the workplace, was able to stay on the

air because the network was able to argue that the program attracted a “large quality audience” of upscale working women (66). While targeting a “quality” (female) demographic has been key in shaping the resonance of the term, Kirsten Marthe Lentz also highlights in her article, “Quality vs. Relevance: Feminism, Race and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television” that *Mary Tyler Moore* and other MTM productions were an early attempt to overhaul and renovate “television’s tarnished image” (46). More specifically, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was a “quality,” television-elevating show because it demonstrated the impact of feminism on the medium of television (Lentz 45). While 1960s Norman Lear and Tandem/TAT productions dealt with “real” world social issues, such as racial politics, in a “relevant,” way grounded in realistic representation (*All in the Family* (1968-1979) is the dominant example), MTM productions like *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Rhoda* dealt with gender politics in an aesthetically improved and more creatively filmic “quality” context. Both discourses, those of “quality” and “relevance,” have generally been seen as “part of the same project in a narrative of televisual change” (Lentz 47). However, the discourse of “quality television,” in contrast to the “discourse of representation itself” of “relevance programming” (Lentz 59), associated itself with feminism, the feminine and improved representations of womanhood, ultimately attaching this feminist discourse to “a self-reflexive critique of the medium of television itself” (47). This tie of “quality” to self-reflexivity is still relevant in scholarly discussions of “quality TV” today, especially in terms of “televisuality” and narrative complexity.

While much has been written about *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and its importance in the development of the “quality TV” discourse due to its progressive “feel” and “quality” female audience (Feuer, “MTM Enterprises” 8), contemporary scholarship foregrounds more recent analysis of “quality” aesthetics. John Thornton Caldwell, for example, defines “televisuality” as a range of techniques that programs and networks use to distinguish themselves from the myriad of other television offerings. “Televisual exhibitionism,” as Caldwell refers to it, which is a formal stylizing performance, also includes “boutique television” that “constructs for itself an air of selectivity, refinement, uniqueness and privilege...[involving] a kind of cinematic spectacle” (106-107). Therefore, shows like *The Sopranos*, which scholar Horace Newcomb sites in *Television: The Critical View* as an example of Caldwell’s “boutique television”, as well as the rest of HBO’s premium fare are defined as “quality TV” due to the cinematic nature of their aesthetics.

Jane Feuer underscores this cinematic influence in her chapter “HBO and the Concept of Quality” from *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, when she analyzes the opening credit sequence of the HBO drama *Six Feet Under* and points out its European art cinema ancestry (145). This concept of “quality” aesthetics is not just relegated to “premium” channels like HBO, however. As Horace Newcomb discusses in his chapter, “‘This Is Not Al Dente’: *The Sopranos* and the New Meaning of ‘Television,’” shows from any number of channels, cable or “free,” can sufficiently attract new, even elite audiences by employing something “different” from the normal aesthetic conventions associated with comedy or drama. Therefore, a network show like

*30 Rock*, which produces a sitcom in terms of a “higher” filmic, single-camera formal context, can be included in the discussion of “quality” in the post-network, “televisual” formation. “Art television,” such as network dramas like *Twin Peaks* and *The Singing Detective*, which are pointed to by film and TV scholar Kristin Thompson in her book *Storytelling in Film and Television*, highlights the transfer of norms from art cinema onto the small screen, a process which can still be seen and analyzed in more contemporary shows like *Parenthood*. Unconventional and cinematic aesthetic features, however, are not the only markers associated with televisual “quality” that scholars have exposed and theorized.

Many scholars, including the aforementioned Newcomb and Feuer, have considered “quality TV” in terms of narrative strategies, “juxtaposed storylines” (Feuer, “HBO” 149) and “personal touch” or authorship (Newcomb 106-107). In an effort to explain and theorize this largely contemporary phenomenon, Jason Mittell coined the term “narrative complexity” to define the “narrational mode” of contemporary American television that features a shifting balance of episodic and serial forms (29). The “long-form narrative structure of series television,” rather than following a model of storytelling similar to self-contained feature films, is what, for Mittell, distinguishes the televisual medium and narrative complexity from conventional modes of episodic and serial form (29). Mittell also posits that narratively complex shows allow for greater opportunities for creativity and “a palette of audience responses” (30) that are unique to television as a medium. “Complex,” overarching narratives with multiple storylines and recurring plots also offer richer pleasures and stand as examples of the recent shift in narrational

strategies. However, ties to value like “quality” should only be assigned to individual shows rather than the narrational mode as a whole according to Mittell. Shows like *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Lost* (2004-2010) and *The West Wing* (1999-2006) are considered “quality” not only because of their “quality” aesthetics intellectually demanding narratives, but also because they, like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, attract a very selective, “quality” demographic. This more valuable audience is also theoretically attracted to series helmed by authors who came to the television medium from the “high culture” world of film and whose televisual products are labeled as “something intentional, something sensitive, [and] something ‘personal’” (Newcomb 573).

While “narrative complexity” is regularly associated with “premium” channel shows that also feature high production values and “quality” cinematic aesthetics, it is important to note that Mittell also cites more traditionally generic shows, such as the sitcom *Arrested Development*, as exemplary specifically in terms of narrative density and “rewatchability” (31). Therefore, while many scholars regularly ascribe the term “quality” to cable dramas, it is important to underscore that is not always necessary for a series to be on cable, cinematically stylized, helmed by an author whose career originated in film and complex in narrative to attract a premium niche audience and be deemed “quality.” However, while “narrative complexity” does help firmly position a series within the discourse of “quality TV,” narrative elements, like intertextuality and paratextual associations, also play an important role in associating programs with “quality.”

According to television scholar Jonathan Gray, “given their extended presence, any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or program’s many proliferations” (2). Therefore, paratexts, such as trailers, reports from the set, ads, videogames and other narrative extensions, continually add meaning to the source text and make the story world of a show like *Lost* more immersive and “quality” bound. In other words, these various paratextual sites can reinforce the “quality” rhetoric, tone and aesthetic of a series or even serve as a viewer’s first “quality”-laden introduction to a show, therefore shaping the “frames and filters” through which he or she perceives the program upon actually watching it (4). Promos and paratexts, therefore, are incredibly important in terms of establishing series as “quality” because they are tasked with both constructing and privileging that rhetoric as part of the overall cultural discourse.

Intertextual references are also another way of mobilizing “quality” connections both within and surrounding a show. As John Fiske points out in his chapter on intertextuality from *Television Culture*, the theory of intertextuality “proposes that any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it” (108). While media scholars Brian Ott and Cameron Walter largely support this theorization of intertextuality as both an interpretive practice of audiences and “a stylistic device consciously employed by producers of media” (429), Fiske goes on to argue that intertextuality is what exists “in the space *between* texts” (108). Either way, both definitions rely on viewer recognition of an alternate text or an elusive cultural image bank, each with values and connotations assigned to them. Like

paratexts, therefore, intertextual references and allusions have meaningful influence on the texts in which they are included because they not only exert the cultural knowledge and intelligence of the text (or rather, its creators), but they also allow viewers the agency to make those connections based on their own cultural knowledge. This participatory element again underscores the immersive, “quality” nature of “complex” television texts like *30 Rock*, as well as “elite” filmic texts like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* that Gray repeatedly cites as exemplary paratextual examples. Once again, televisual associations with “quality” and textual depth can be traced to the filmic medium, but a number of media scholars have also discussed and analyzed televisual “quality” specifically in regard to genre.

While Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi as well as Lentz establish that discourse about “quality TV” began with 1970s sitcoms like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, for the most part scholars have chosen to analyze shows that fall within the genre of drama as “quality” texts, especially those on “premium” cable channels. As referenced earlier, both Feuer and Newcomb have chosen to analyze HBO’s dramatic series *Six Feet Under* and *The Sopranos* respectively, to make arguments for the contemporary cinematic “quality” of television texts as well as their authorial prowess. As Jason Mittell points out in his book *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, some scholars, including Jonathan Gray, have also looked at comedy and parody as used on shows like *The Simpsons*, but many critics, scholars and viewers still consider such forms of comedy as “a sign of decline in the sitcom genre” (180). Therefore, even when “smart,” intertextual comedies such as *The Simpsons* are addressed within academic

study, they are not treated or even regularly deemed “quality” texts, but cited more often as examples of televisual entertainment that appeal to a large audience, failing to reach the “quality TV” heights of dramatic texts in aesthetics and critical regard. However, as Newcomb points out in “This Is Not Al Dente,” conversation with media and genre scholars such as David Thorburn, Peter Brooks and Robert Allen, melodrama, never explicitly associated with “quality,” is a defining through-line in many genres, from soap operas to Westerns, with some shows more melodramatically “excessive” than others (566). Therefore, if scholars can follow the melodramatic through-line in “high” and “low” genres, why can we not also track and analyze contemporary “quality” programming as it exists in genres outside of drama? In the post-network era, more and more network comedies, which are usually the most derided by a majority of critics and scholars, are engaging in long-running, serialized narratives, have more fully developed characters and utilize “quality” associated cinematic aesthetics. However, most comedies that have warranted the “quality” label, such as *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), receive only brief mention in the chapters of books like Janet McCabe and Kim Akass’ *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. Even feminist scholarship on *Roseanne* (1988-1997), a series embraced by fans (it replaced *The Cosby Show* at the top of the ratings in its second season) and considered one of the most progressive sitcoms in television history, refrains from labeling or arguing for the show as “quality” due to critical ambivalence toward the show and Roseanne as a “contradictory” woman (Rowe 81). Therefore, genre scholarship needs to expand to include a serious and explicit evaluation of “quality” outside of traditionally elite genres



to understand not only how television “quality” is itself changing, but also the tastes and vocabulary of television audiences.

In the end, this survey of scholarly genre analysis in terms of “quality TV” clearly denotes a gap in the field of television studies concerning the consideration of comedy as a “high” genre. However, the preceding evaluation of TV studies scholarship in terms of form and content as it pertains to “quality TV” also illuminates further areas lacking in academic study. For example, only a small handful of scholars, most notably Jonathan Gray in his piece “The Reviews Are In” from the anthology *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, have considered more acutely the role critics and journalists play in positioning shows within the “quality” discourse. Media scholars including Julie D’Acci, Ralph Brauer and Michael Kackman (who credits the work of Mittell and Dan Harries) have also considered the way fan action and response helps characterize shows as “quality” due in part to “operational aesthetics,” which allow fans to deconstruct and revel in the process of complex narratives and their function (Kackman, “*Flow Favorites*”). However, there still remains a lack of scholarly analysis of viewer response in the digital realm and on sites like the *A.V. Club* that are designated for the promotion, critique and discussion of select, largely “quality” television texts by viewers on a week-to-week basis.

Finally, as the concluding contemplation of “quality” genres helps illuminate, the consideration of network shows as “quality” in the post-network era and what scholar Jeremy Butler in *Television Style* calls the “age of media convergence” (138) is relatively sparse, as most scholars tend to write about “elite” shows on “premium” cable networks

with higher production budgets and creators with filmic roots. While these “quality” shows serve as useful examples of the “quality” or operational aesthetic and complex narrative of high-end TV, they also stand as recognizable counterparts to contemporary network shows that employ the same methods to construct and position themselves as “quality.” The creators, writers and network producers of *Parenthood*, *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*, in that case, must work to mobilize the “quality” discourse and to attract a more desirable audience in order to remain popular with a mass audience that is large enough to warrant their continued scheduling on a major network. Therefore, there is a need for an extended study that focuses on the way the “quality” discourse is being constructed about and around contemporary network series in order to highlight the way “quality” is being presorted and marketed to wider audiences as well as how critics and audiences are recognizing and mobilizing that same discourse in order to elevate certain network series.

To analyze “quality” television in terms of form and content as well as audience and critical response, I will employ a number of theoretical approaches including narratology and semiology. However, the primary bodies of theory that will inform my analytical approach and argument are poststructuralism and discourse theory. I will use these theories, and more specifically the scholarship of Jane Feuer, Jason Mittell and Jonathan Gray, to analyze *30 Rock*, *Parenthood* and *Parks and Recreation* as socially constructed by various entities as forms of “quality TV.” Each of these scholars’ ideas, ranging on topics from television’s cinematic production values, narrative complexity and intertextuality and paratexts, has significantly shaped my perspective on televisual

“quality,” how it is produced and how it is discussed. Essentially, their ideas and case studies will ultimately allow me to evaluate not only how these three shows construct and position themselves as “quality” texts, but also how and why viewers and critics discursively perceive and construct them that way. Finally, Horace Newcomb’s analysis of *The Sopranos* and the new meaning of television in his anthology *Television: The Critical View*, Martin Barker’s “Analysing Discourse” and Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are also important influences on my theoretical perspective of the “quality TV” discourse.

In order to analyze the “quality TV” discourse produced about the series *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Parenthood*, I will analyze the mise-en-scène, shooting style, iconography, editing, narrative and acting in select episodes of all three shows. More specifically, I will choose episodes and select representative textual examples that have been cited in audience and industry discourse while also exemplifying or illuminating the overall tone, narrative structure and formal style of each series. Therefore, I can analyze how each program operates in terms of semiotics, aesthetics, narrative, ideology and, most importantly, the “quality TV” discourse based on audience and critic practices of distinction. I will also analyze the “quality TV” discourse circulated about these shows in both the popular press (*Entertainment Weekly*) and trade magazines (*Variety*) as well as see how the rhetoric of “quality” in such periodicals is either ignored, paralleled or perpetuated by critics and viewers of each show on the *A.V. Club* website’s weekly “T.V. Club” posts. By considering the “quality TV” discourse and its existence in these paratextual sites, I will be able to study the various ways both critics and fans

discursively read these three shows as “quality.” I will also, however, be able to study how and why these three particular shows inhabit discussions of “quality” in terms of their formal and narrative similarities and deviations. Ultimately, this methodology will allow me to qualitatively analyze the ways in which the discourse of “quality” is socially constructed through repetitive use by television texts, critics, viewers and the press.

When it comes to predicting and preempting problems for this methodological approach, I know I will need to be careful in selecting representative examples to textually analyze from each series, especially when I begin talking about overall narrative structure, ideology and editing. Obviously, readers of my research must understand and agree that the episodes I choose are exemplary of recurring themes or images in each series and that I am familiar with their recurrence. Therefore, I will intentionally focus on episodes cited by critics and fans while also making sure to illuminate my overarching authority on and knowledge of each series by referring to other similar narrative or formal moments in each text. I also predict that problems of limitation and generalization may arise in terms of my *A.V. Club*-centric audience research. Since I am looking at only one site that has a particularly engaged form of readership, I will need to be sure to announce that phenomenon and refrain from placing too much emphasis on commenter insights or conflating my own analysis with that of the general audience or viewer. In turn, I will also need to be sure to adequately qualify the agency of each *A.V. Club* commenters I cite when analyzing how they write about *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Parenthood*, as well as how the site as a whole both employs and affects the “quality TV” discourse.

Each chapter of my thesis will treat one of my three objects of study as a case study for analyzing how the “quality” discourse is constructed and mobilized by creators, marketers, the texts themselves, critics and viewers. The first chapter of my thesis will focus on an analysis of the ratings-challenged sitcom *30 Rock* by specifically questioning the show’s writers and network producers’ ability to re-assert the program’s “quality” network series status by presenting a season five live episode “stunt” entitled, fittingly, “Live Show.” This live event essentially served to present the show in a more traditional and arguably less “quality” format, giving critics and viewers the opportunity to evaluate a number of the show’s valued eccentricities in a markedly more conventional context. While “Live Show” strove to maintain some of the intertextuality, narrative depth and formal complexity of a normal filmed episode, the use of multiple cameras, a live studio audience, theatrical staging and scripted “breaking” stripped the show of its usual “quality” single-camera aesthetic and subtle intellectual complexity. Ultimately, like *Parenthood*, *30 Rock* relies on aesthetics to help position itself as “quality,” but critics and viewers also perceive and forward the show as “quality” due to its unconventional narratives, quirky characters and rapid-fire, intertextual dialogue. By analyzing an episodic deviation of the show that takes place in an alternate context (traditional live multi-camera sitcom) as well as the immediate critical and audience response “Live Show” received, I will be able to more distinctly pronounce the show’s recurring “quality” elements while studying how critics and fans were pushed to re-evaluate the series in light of such a brief episodic deviation.

My second chapter will focus on *Parks and Recreation*, a series that made the transition from mediocre spin-off (of *The Office*) to “quality” sitcom over the span of its first and second seasons. In order to analyze the changes or developments in the show that helped attach it to the “quality TV” discourse already immediately inhabited by *30 Rock* and *Parenthood*, I will analyze an episode from season one, and then the seventh episode from the show’s third season, “Pawnee Rangers,” so I can compare and contrast them in terms of form, character development and narrative. Ultimately, I am interested in how critics and viewers currently read the show, its characters and its narrative development in terms of television “quality” and its larger discourse. Therefore, as in all of my other chapter case studies, I will consider the rhetoric about the show found in the popular press, such as *Entertainment Weekly* (the February 18, 2011 issue features the *Parks and Recreation* cast on the cover with the title story “The Smartest Comedy on TV: 101 Reason Why We Love [*Parks and Recreation*]”), trades, online criticism and audience response on the *A.V. Club* in order to study how the show is now constructed and perceived as “quality.” Overall, the show is repeatedly cited as an “elite,” uniquely “sentimental” comedy, rather than an immensely popular or groundbreaking series, so this chapter will look closely at why and how the series is constructed this way via aesthetics, acting, writing and the use of parody.

My third and final chapter will focus on *Parenthood*’s perception by viewers and the press as an “authentic” and, therefore, “quality” series due to the show’s distinct cinema vérité style, ensemble cast of “genuine” actors and intertextual references to Jason Katims’ other “quality”-deemed NBC drama *Friday Night Lights*. Ultimately, I

will argue that viewer comments about the show's brand of "authenticity" and "quality" parallel not only the critical reception found on the *A.V. Club* and in publications like *Entertainment Weekly*, but also Katims' own description of the show based on interviews he has given about the series. However, while the show does stand as a more "genuine," "quality" depiction of contemporary family life due to its "naturalistic" filming style, "quality TV" associated actors and a number of progressively contemporary narrative elements (depiction of a family dealing with raising a son with Asperger's and a single mother who moves her family back home to live with her parents, for example), the narrative repeatedly underscores and falls back on patriarchal norms. In light of this fact, which I will largely expose through textual analysis of the second season premiere of the show, entitled "I Hear You, I See You," the series continues to stand as a viable amalgamation of conventionality and "quality," which helps explain the show's broad appeal and relative ratings success in comparison to *Friday Night Lights* and the other series I analyze.

In terms of all three chapters, it will also prove useful to consider how fan response has changed in relation to the "quality TV" discourse. Today, viewers can discuss their favorite (or not-so-favorite) shows such as *30 Rock*, *Parks and Rec* and *Parenthood* with other viewers and experts on platforms like the *A.V. Club*, when decades earlier TV fans such as Dorothy Swanson had to take to letter writing and starting organizations to generate recognition for shows they saw as "quality" fare worth keeping on the air (Swanson 2). While Swanson's Viewers for Quality Television organization was able to get the attention of network executives and series writers via

letter writing and media appearances, the Internet has created opportunities for viewers to not only regularly and publicly voice their opinions about a series, but also to interact with critics, journalists and even creators in a more immediate way. In turn, paratexts such as *A.V. Club* reviews give fans greater agency in the positioning of shows as “quality” by providing them a public forum to mobilize familiar rhetoric that fuels “quality” distinctions and reiterations within popular transmedia discourse.

In the end, all three chapters will work to identify how each of these three series illuminate various facets of the contemporary “quality TV” discourse, which these shows help construct individually and, in certain regards, collectively as primetime staples of the NBC network. Each chapter will employ textual analysis, historical analysis and discourse analysis in order to analyze the elements that help position and sustain each series within the “quality” discourse for both critics and fans. Ultimately, this approach will allow me to analyze the ways network television is evolving in an effort to attract both niche and mass audiences. Series such as *30 Rock*, *Parks and Rec* and *Parenthood* are combining “quality” markers with either more conventional narratives or traditionally “low” genres on networks still largely bound to numbers-based ratings data rather than subjective associations with textual and audience value or DVR and streaming data. Will this help save “quality” content as television becomes more popular on a spectrum of screens?



## **Chapter 1: How *30 Rock* Reaffirmed Its “Quality TV” Status by “Doing It Live”**

On October 14, 2010, *30 Rock* (2006-present) broke away from its regular format, airing two separate live episodes in its Thursday night East and West Coast timeslots. These two live half hours (collectively referred to as “Live Show”), featured some jokes exclusive to either the East or West Coast broadcast, were openly labeled as a “gift to fans” by *30 Rock* actress Jane Krakowski in the lyrics specially written and performed for the opening theme song that aired as part of the East Coast broadcast. This “gift,” in turn, also attracted 6.7 million viewers (Hibberd, “Live *30 Rock*”), which is the most the series drew for one episode during its fifth season and, for the most part, its entire series run. Many would argue that *30 Rock* was obviously successful in “stunting” (Caldwell 61) to draw in a larger audience based purely on gimmick and hype, but creator, writer and lead actress Tina Fey also repeatedly stated in magazine and television interviews that the idea to do a live show was born not out of ratings struggles, but out of the 2007 Writer’s Strike, when the cast did a stage version of the show at Upright Citizen’s Brigade in New York. According to Fey, doing the show on stage for a live audience made the actors simply think it would also be “fun” to do a show live on network television for the enjoyment of the fans (Armstrong 91), and also helped underscore the cast’s talent as “real,” theatrical actors.

Since its debut on NBC in 2007, *30 Rock* has been celebrated and discussed by a wide variety of critics, journalists and fans as one of television’s “best,” “funniest” and

highest “quality” offerings. The show immediately took up residence on a number of “Best Comedy Series” or “Must-Watch TV” lists by publications by the likes of *The Los Angeles Times*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *The New York Times*. In addition, the series has also been repeatedly discussed in the articles and comment sections of online publications, such as popular culture criticism site the *A.V. Club* (which I will analyze in greater detail throughout this chapter). All of these sources, therefore, are integral in situating the show in relation to the “quality TV” discourse. However, *30 Rock*’s nominations for a slew of Emmy and Golden Globe awards for writing, acting and best comedy series (for which the series won the Emmy after only its first season) also helped cement its position as “quality” comedy and television long before any sort of aesthetic or stylistic deviation was attempted. Overall, this chapter will investigate *30 Rock*’s position within the “quality TV” discourse, as well as how “Live Show” functions as a self-made paratext that encourages critics and viewers to re-asses the “quality” nature of the sitcom in the contemporary televisual landscape beyond award shows and ratings numbers.

First, the fact that *30 Rock* has the dexterity in production and performers as well as the network approval to attempt a live episode in the middle of its fifth season is due in part to *30 Rock*’s ongoing perception as “quality TV” worth preserving. Speaking of the connotations of “quality,” however, it is worthwhile to briefly note that the series’ overarching narrative surrounding Fey’s lead character, Liz Lemon, falls within the traditional perception of network series, specifically comedies and sitcoms, that are labeled as “quality” due to their attention to feminist issues and feminized status (Lentz 48). Like its predecessor *Mary Tyler Moore*, *30 Rock* both overtly and indirectly explores

(in a comedic tone) feminist issues, most notably in the season five episode entitled “TGS Hates Women,” in which Liz emphatically crusades against the overtly sexual actions and appearance of a female writer hired to combat accusations of misogyny. This narrative-based “feminine” discourse, though notably toned down and less self-conscious on *30 Rock*, is central to “quality TV” according to media scholar Kristen Marthe Lentz, who attributes the origin of “quality” to television’s attempt in the 1970s to renovate its “tarnished image” by countering more masculine forms of media (46). Although “Live Show” does not feature any directly feminist messages in its narrative, the live aesthetic of the show, and its more traditional three-camera viewpoint, present viewers with a glimpse at *30 Rock* in a more expected, “feminine,” *Mary Tyler Moore*-like sitcom form (live studio audience, multi-camera setup and all). This is a format more regularly associated with Lentz’s brand of “quality,” large viewing audiences and a time when there truly was a national television dialogue. Therefore, “Live Show” gives the *MTM*-nodding *30 Rock* a seemingly more universal, recognizable look and tone meant to attract a wider range of viewers and assert the series’ superiority both in terms of contemporary media and a historical association with “quality” network TV.

The sitcom format and the television medium as a whole are, of course, no strangers to live broadcasts. Television began as a live medium, moving from what Jane Feuer calls a “live on tape” era to simply a medium that practices “an ideology of the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous and the real” (14). In addition, the tradition of a number of shows, sitcom or not, producing various live episodes, usually to try and save ratings-starved series, is well established. However, the seemingly unselfish

intent of the *30 Rock* live event not only calls forth questions about the show's overall appeal and audience reception, but also the current perception and discussion of "quality TV." What is the benefit of a critically lauded, cinematically styled sitcom in the post-network era creating live content simply for "fun"? Also, how does "Live Show" inversely underscore the merits of *30 Rock* as a series and help position it discursively, under usual circumstances, as "quality TV" for both fans and critics? Overall, a close analysis of the live broadcast's narrative as well as its formal and aesthetic values helps illuminate the agency and exclusivity *30 Rock*, largely outside of the live broadcast, allows viewers through the "quality TV" discourse. More importantly, an examination of the paratexts surrounding the live episode as well as theories on "quality TV" highlight how *30 Rock*'s "Live Show" works like a paratext to reassert the series as a "quality" text via fan and critic discourse in addition to the integral roles intertextuality and cinematic aesthetics regularly play in that positioning.

Before embarking on an analysis of demarcations of televisual "quality" and trying to situate *30 Rock*'s form and narrative within such discourse, it is first necessary to define what a paratext is before arguing that a portion of a text, in this case a special live event, can work as a sort of self-made paratext that helps re-define a series as "quality TV." As television scholar Jonathan Gray defines in his book, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*, a paratext is one of the many extra-textual proliferations of a media text, such as a trailer, a review, or a promo that individuals may encounter on a daily basis. Essentially, paratexts are the "greeters, gatekeepers and cheerleaders for and of the media" (17). According to Gray, "paratexts

can inflect our interpretations of texts as we enter them...so too can they inflect our re-entry to television texts" (42). Therefore, paratexts are filters through which viewers pass both before and *while* encountering "the text itself," which in this specific case study is a singular, albeit unconventional, episode of *30 Rock*. Of course, "Live Show" is itself a portion of the *30 Rock* text as a whole, rather than a more ancillary review, critique or promo. However, "Live Show," can (and, in my opinion, does) function paratextually because it alters the way viewers re-enter and discursively evaluate the series as a whole, with the uncharacteristic episode acting ultimately as an intertextual promoter of the overall quality of the series in contrast to its regularly scheduled form (whether that's what Fey and those involved intended). Because the live incarnation turns out to be so starkly different from more conventional episodes in pace, aesthetics and stated intent, viewers cannot help but read "Live Show" and discursively evaluate it in contrast to the rest of the normally recorded series and other series as a whole. In fact, *A.V. Club* writer Todd VanDerWerff even wrote in his review of "Live Show" that, "this wasn't an episode of *30 Rock*. This was like an episode of the multi-camera sitcom Tina Fey makes after *30 Rock* goes off the air and she wants to make a big enough hit to be able to pay for her daughter's college education 50 times over." Immediately, viewers like VanDerWerff perceived and publicly evaluated "Live Show" as a text wholly disparate from *30 Rock* the series due to its live format, aesthetics differences, narrative rhythm, and economic motivation, making it almost exclusively paratextually relevant.

Overall, to avid *30 Rock* viewers many aspects of *30 Rock*'s "Live Show" feel strange, unfamiliar or even subdued due to the live multi-camera format, and these

differences ultimately caused viewers already familiar with the series to continually make quality comparisons and value judgments online once the episode aired. At the most basic level, the narrative structure of the episode (East and West Coast versions) retains the typical three-story premise so characteristic of the series, albeit in a noticeably more conventional, less fluid, and, therefore, more immediately divergent form. The general narrative arc or A-plot of both “Live Show” broadcasts involves Liz Lemon. In what is repeatedly recognized by viewers as “the oldest sitcom plot in the book” (VanDerWerff, “Live Show”), the narrative action of the episode revolves around a forgotten birthday. In this case, the entire cast and crew of Liz’s program, *The Girlie Show with Tracy Jordan* (*TGS*), have forgotten her “big day,” including Liz’s boss and friend, Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin). At the same time, Jack is struggling to give up drinking out of solidarity with his pregnant girlfriend, Avery Jessup, leaving him erratic and desperate. In the episode’s third minor storyline or C-plot, *TGS* star Tracy Jordan has watched “the non-porn version of *The Carol Burnett Show*” and wants Liz to allow him to frequently “crack up” in the middle of sketches that night on *TGS* like the *Carol Burnett Show* actors did. Acting once again as *TGS* problem solver, Liz tells Tracy that this impromptu laughter is called “breaking” (as in “breaking character”) and informs him that she will not allow it, only causing Tracy to adamantly state his intent to “break.” As the episode unfolds further, Liz repeatedly realizes that no one she knows has remembered her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday including her pilot boyfriend, Carol (played by Matt Damon).

In the meantime, Jack tries to replace his drinking ritual with other activities, like knitting and magic, but eventually resorts to finding other ways to get buzzed like

sniffing paint or smelling *TGS* actress Jenna Maroney's mouth after she drinks wine. Tracy also continues to "break" by purposely laughing or misspeaking both in conversations with *TGS* staffers and during the taping of *TGS* that night when he impersonates President Obama and Oprah. Eventually, Liz learns that it is also Yadwega the studio cleaning lady's birthday and that everyone is signing a card for Yadwega, completely ignorant of Liz's birthday. Fed up, Liz tells Jack in a rage that it is her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and soon after Jack gathers the *TGS* cast and crew for damage control. Together they decide to steal Yadwega's birthday celebration and give it to Liz instead. Liz is flattered by their gesture, and as a last birthday wish and the episode's fulfilling final moment of closure, Liz asks Jack to share a drink with her in his office. As they both take a sip, the camera switches from the live shot to a recorded image of Jack and Liz in the same position. Therefore, the "liveness" of the episode is justified by Jack's sobriety, which is finally remedied, putting everything, including the show's aesthetics, back in order. In contrast with a regularly taped episode of *30 Rock*, the rhythm of the developing narrative, and the storyline itself (though comparatively as complex as that of a normal episode) feel more plodding and, as VanDerWerff points out, stereotypical or cliché. In addition, this final moment of closure in which the "liveness" of the episode is remedied acts like a reassuring nod to fans now ready for a return to textual normalcy.

In terms of the both planned and unplanned differences between the two separate broadcasts of "Live Show," each airing contained its own special theme song lyrics sung live either by actress Jane Krakowski (Jenna) or actor Danny Baker (who plays Cheyenne Jackson). In addition, each live episode featured a number of unique jokes within the set

structure of the narrative just described. For example, Jon Hamm made a guest appearance on each live broadcast as Dr. Drew Baird, but his infomercial for hand transplants was altered slightly from the East Coast version during the second, West Coast, airing – instead of touting hand transplants from executed criminals, he instead referred to groundbreaking research at Yale University for “hand Frankensteining.” Also, in the flashback that features Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Liz, Louis-Dreyfus first compares receptionist Jonathan (played by Maulick Pancholy) to the protagonist in *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008) in the East Coast broadcast, and in the West Coast show makes a joke about Jonathan being similar to Aladdin (to greater applause from the live audience). Miscues also made up a number of the deviations between the episodes, as mistakes like a boom mic visible in the East Coast airing, Baldwin accidentally dropping a book or a wall poster failing to fall on cue were corrected in the West Coast broadcast.

While the narrative structure of “Live Show” remains similar to those of pre-recorded episodes, the aesthetic of live *30 Rock* is an immediately notable deviation from the usual look of the text. Normally recorded in a cinematic style via a single camera, “Live Show” makes use of a more traditional multi-camera sitcom setup to capture all the action in 30 Rockefeller Plaza. This distinct and obviously dissonant transition is ultimately referenced by Liz and Jack at the end of the episode to explain not only the narrative difference between when Liz and Jack are sober (recorded) or drunk (live), but also as a self-referential nod to *30 Rock*’s live deviations. In addition, the episode makes multiple references to both the live format itself, its low-budget feel (multi-camera is more economical) and its unpredictable nature as a means of purposely and self-



reflexively deriding it, creating a unique distance between the live episode and the overall *30 Rock* text. For example, when the episode first opens on Jack's office and Liz enters the room, Jack knowingly asks if things feel "different." As Liz looks around (and the live studio audience cheers raucously at the underhanded acknowledgment of their presence), Jack tells her that "everything looks like a Mexican soap opera." With this comment made not two minutes into the live event, the show is already self-reflexively acknowledging its new, lower quality aesthetic while also underscoring that aesthetics' contemporary relation to conventional sitcom and soap opera programming. In addition, Jack's emphasis on the episode looking like a Mexican soap opera also subtly references the *30 Rock*'s ongoing ratings struggles, with the sitcom regularly attracting a smaller audience than the primetime soap opera *El Talisman* on Univision.

Though *30 Rock* generally adheres to various sitcom conventions via its three-storyline format, character development and common environment narrative (everything centers around 30 Rockefeller Plaza), another thing that sets the series apart from other more popular sitcoms, such as CBS' *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present), *Two and a Half Men* (2003-present) or *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-present), is the lack of a live studio audience. In another distancing and derogatory jab at the low nature of live programming, Liz's explanation to Tracy of what "breaking" is and her forbidding of him doing it because they are above such a "cheap" way of getting laughs also self-reflexively mock the live format by consciously highlighting and, therefore, denying viewers one of its greatest audience pleasures – recognizing mistakes. Rather than leaving the "liveness" of the episode unacknowledged and allowing "breaking" to enhance the performative

nature of the event, Fey and company use the medium as a mode of intelligent, underhanded critique that repeatedly privileges the normal, pre-recorded version of the series and underscores its superior live audience-less, largely cinematic look and feel. As Jane Feuer points out in her article “HBO and the Concept of Quality TV,” “quality drama” was marked as the successful merger of the soap opera with an established genre like the cop show or the medical series (157). Using the same qualification, can *30 Rock*’s self-referenced live soap opera and traditional three-camera sitcom aesthetic in combination with its usual cinematic drama aesthetic also be considered a “quality” re-combination? As a medium, television does have “a greater capacity to emulate live performance than either cinema or literature” (Allen 116). So why then does the live format in contemporary times fail to enter the “quality TV” discourse and inversely position *30 Rock*’s normally pre-recorded state as superior? The answer lies first in the more artistic and sophisticated connotations of cinema in relation to television aesthetics.

Numerous television scholars have considered questions of what establishes or makes up “quality television” both in terms of form and narrative content. Generally, “quality TV” demarcation and analysis revolve around what TV scholar Michael Newman calls “the cinematization of television” (2), or the transformation of TV’s look (single camera, cinematic editing) and narrative (interwoven plot threads) into a more overtly cinematic form. For example, Feuer’s analysis of the “quality” HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) largely centers on the connection between the show’s artistic aesthetics and those of European art cinema. Similarly, Horace Newcomb’s reading of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) considers the cinematic ancestry of the HBO series, which

helps position it as a new kind of “TV” (562). As these examples attest, pay and basic cable networks – particularly HBO – became important players in the development of innovative and aesthetically superior quality television, especially in the 1990s (Thompson xviii). In an effort by both industry professionals and critics to legitimize the medium of television and to attract a more elite and valuable niche audience, television culture, from production to journalism, has routinely made a cinematic analogy (Newman 2). This cinematic analogy has led to a more frequent consideration of TV in aesthetic terms, with “quality often signified by historical subjects” (Fuller 302) presented through a very cinematic lens. For example, premium channels like HBO have recently featured shows like *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present) and the miniseries *The Pacific* (2010), which immediately gained quality trademarks due to their artistic and sophisticated looks at the old West, prohibition and war. While these programs also have major production budgets and are set on epically grand scales, their conventionally cinematic aesthetics are what primarily place them within the “quality TV” discourse. Essentially, contemporary television (and the academic discipline of television studies) has gained legitimacy and cultural capital due to the regular discussion of this medium in “aesthetic terms previously reserved for the relatively more legitimate popular art form of cinema” (Kackman, “Quality Television”). Therefore, *30 Rock*’s brief employment of “low culture” associated soap opera, sitcom and uniquely televisual aesthetics in “Live Show” help to paratextually push the series back into the discussion of quality television via comparison with its regular film-influenced form.

Like a number of more modern, critically acclaimed situation comedies, such as *Arrested Development* (2003-2006), *30 Rock* consistently employs a single, noticeably handheld camera to capture the complex episodic and serialized action of the narrative in a four-walled scene. This “cinematic single-camera schema” (Butler 140) serves to immediately differentiate and elevate *30 Rock* from three-camera sitcoms like *Big Bang Theory* and even NBC’s *Are You There Chelsea?* and *Whitney*, positioning it as a more sophisticated brand of situation comedy in the same way *ER*’s more cinematic single-camera style separated it from typical TV drama and soap opera and sitcom fare. While most of the scenes in “Live Show” are viewed from what is assumed to be the vantage point of the live audience sitting directly behind the cameras and in place of a fourth wall, a normal *30 Rock* episode features more subjective point-of-view shots from a single handheld camera with far less immobile long shots of a scene.

The show’s use of single-camera based, handheld cinéma vérité aesthetics also allows for more cinematic and thus quality-connoting forms of editing not usually found on primetime network television, especially sitcoms. For example, “Live Show” clumsily, and therefore humorously, alludes to a frequently used jump cutting technique employed on *30 Rock* to initiate flashback sequences. When Liz remembers a joke she told about Jack’s receptionist Jonathan, and thereafter Jonathan claims to not know what she is talking about, the camera dramatically pans to the right before cutting to another shot on an alternate part of the *Saturday Night Live* soundstage where the live episode versions were filmed. This attempt at recreating the rapid-fire feel of editing in regularly filmed episodes of *30 Rock* feels sloppy and imitational at best, underscoring how these

more artistic edits and aesthetics of the show cannot be achieved or would feel wildly out of place in the conventional multi-camera sitcom format. By presenting viewers with a single-episode glimpse of what *30 Rock* would look like as a more traditional sitcom and the artistic sacrifices required within, Fey and company are able to comparatively underscore the high quality nature of the series, especially in relation to aesthetics. However, *30 Rock* is positioned within the discourse of quality television not only as a result of its quality-connoting visual style.

Many contemporary shows deemed at the forefront of televisual quality in terms of aesthetics, such as *Boardwalk Empire* and *Mad Men* (2007-present) also feature narratives that are arguably more complex in their combination of episodic and serialized forms – this means that weekly episodes contain not only a contained plotline, but also interweave season and series long questions and plot points into weekly episodes. While some plotlines are both begun and resolved within a single episode of a “narratively complex” show like *Lost* (2004-2010), for example, there are also larger overarching plotlines and questions that recur from week to week but are not fully resolved. Nagging inquiries like “What is the Island?” and “Who is Jacob?” are cryptic examples from that series’ overarching and epic mythology. For TV scholar Jason Mittell, the more serialized nature of “quality TV” also contributes to an important quality factor he calls “rewatchability” (31), which *30 Rock* regularly taps into and helps underscore its more complex nature. For example, the show, though not as complex or puzzling as *Lost*, consistently alludes to and even builds on its own mythology from episode to episode. By referencing old plotlines to establish Tracy Jordan’s mental instability or featuring

moments that recall overarching mysteries of the series such as Kenneth the Page's real age, *30 Rock* establishes itself as a televisual text with distinct narrative depth and self-awareness. These embedded and intratextual mythological references also urge viewers to remain constantly engaged not only with each new episode, but also with past seasons, calling on the "specialized knowledge" of the viewer in relation to the text itself (Ott and Cameron 430). By extension, paratexts, such as episode and season recaps, reviews, and even promotional materials can become more value-laden because they can help viewers understand the self-referential nature of the text more clearly and completely by probing or explaining various series questions that may be lost within the complex narrative. Overall, these brief examples help underscore *30 Rock*'s more complicated and intradependent sitcom narrative, which is, in many ways, just as multi-layered and potent in the "Live Show" format. *30 Rock*'s complex narrative is, in the end, rife with intellectually engaging intertextuality and popular culture references that connote "quality," leading viewers to explore other outside texts and intertexts for more complete understanding.

One of the most effective joke variations in both the East and West Coast versions of "Live Show" that points to the series' overall narrative complexity are the intertextual references made by Louis-Dreyfus, who plays Liz Lemon in the Jonathan and Liz-centered flashback sequence previously described. In the East Coast version, faux-Liz chides Jonathan, (who is played by an Indian actor), saying, "he will never be the Millionaire" in an over-dramatic Indian accent, referencing the popular film *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2009). In the West Coast version, flashback Liz jokingly

likens Jonathan to Disney's famous street-rat-turned-Prince Aladdin. In both instances, the in-studio audience laughs uproariously, immediately recognizing the intertextual references being made and their relevance due to receptionist Jonathan's Indian identity.

Overall, intertextuality is a key component of *30 Rock*'s narrative, with seemingly every episode filled with pleasurable references to outside texts of both high and low esteem (in this case, *Shumdog Millionaire* is a critically-acclaimed Oscar winner and *Aladdin* is an animated children's film). As Brian Ott and Cameron Walter discuss in "Intertextuality: Interpretive Practice and Textual Strategy," there are a number of different conceptions and definitions of intertextuality and its place in and amongst media texts. *30 Rock* is a contemporary text that makes specific allusions and requires readers to bring "specialized knowledge to bear on the text in order to create meaning" (430).

Therefore, theoretically viewers must be highly engaged while viewing the show (and other deeply intertextual series such as *Parks and Rec* and *Community*) to parcel out all of the intertextual meaning-making therein. In addition, *30 Rock*'s audience members, as these alternate examples of intertextuality reflect, must be well versed in both "quality" high culture and more conventional lowbrow fare in order to fully appreciate the show's different references. Today, media consumers, thanks to the Internet, streaming devices and DVRs, are freer to "roam across tastes, kinds of cultures, and media" (Gans viii), meaning that *30 Rock* can engage viewers across boundaries of media culture and taste that are no longer as fixed into "high" and "low" categories. Under normal circumstances, the ability to recognize and understand an intertextual reference within the show's narrative is a highly rewarding experience due to the show's rapid-fire pace and

general breadth of pop culture skewering. However, when placed in the live context and with the addition of live audience laughter, intertextual jokes automatically lose some of their sense of personal flattery and prestige because the viewer is cued to laugh in recognition whether they realize the reference or not. Rather than feeling intellectually superior due to the possession of specialized knowledge congratulated by the series, viewers laughing along with everyone else in the studio may feel like the show is pandering to them as members of a passive audience rather than rewarding them as exclusively knowledgeable individuals. Once again, therefore, by placing itself in a live context with more traditional sitcom elements, *30 Rock*'s "Live Show" comparatively highlights the superior and exclusivity-driven nature of the show in its regularly scheduled format.

"Live Show's" self-made paratextual significance and commitment to the series' broad intertextuality stands in direct contrast with the hype-generating programming most live shows function as, especially when it comes to the sitcom genre. For example, both *The Drew Carey Show* (1995-2004) and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) used live episodes during late season runs to generate viewer interest and some last-ditch positive publicity. The discourse and paratexts surrounding these episodes did not, in contrast to "Live Show," try to position these live events as purely for fun or even fan-benefitting endeavors (Bianculli 108 and "Graceful End). Part of the unremarkable nature of these blatant attempts at hype can also be attributed to the little aesthetic deviation between the live versions of each program and their usually videotaped counterparts. Multi-camera shooting remained the same, the episodes were still scripted and the only real signifiers of



“liveness” were audience laughter based on incidents of “breaking”. In addition, the live versions of these sitcoms did little to nothing to promote their series as quality programs, being read by critics and fans (and promoted by networks) as what John Caldwell calls “stunting” – special episodes aired to attract a higher-than-representative audience members and create a noticeable “spike” in ratings (61).

Three programs that turned to the live “stunt,” however, were able to supersede the low, profit-driven connotations of the ploy, using liveness instead as a way of extending a quality message about their series as a whole. So-called “quality dramas” *The West Wing* (1999-2006) and *ER* (1994-2009) as well as the short-lived sitcom *Roc* (1991-2004) were able to utilize liveness in unexpected ways to tap into current issues and reinforce themselves as quality texts. While *30 Rock*’s forwarding of itself as quality works more comparatively or paratextually than all three of these shows, they collectively prove that the live medium need not always be reduced to a stunt or gimmick. As Jeremy Butler points out in his article, “Style in an Age of Media Convergence,” *ER*, in an attempt to generate both media and public interest in the series’ fourth season, debuted with a live broadcast with “several online events accompanying it” (139). Labeled as the first ever “cyber-event,” the live episode, though panned by critics like the *New York Times*’ James Caryn, maintained *ER*’s “particular use of cinematic style” while also guaranteeing “theatrical” without-a-net performances and exciting, spontaneous improvisation that furthered the “quality” label of the show (Butler 139). For *Roc*, the entire second season of the relatively conventional sitcom was broadcast live for the East Coast audience, even featuring a short fourth wall-breaking

address of that audience by one to the actors before each episode who referenced a current event to verify its liveness (Horowitz, “Roc”).

While part of *Roc*’s “quality” critical acclaim and success as “TV’s only live sitcom” (Graham 3D) stemmed from its cast of trained stage actors (which *30 Rock*’s “Live Show” and Writer’s Strike performance also highlighted) and its focus on the everyday life of a contemporary Africa-American family, *The West Wing*’s successful and quality-deemed live episode was applauded due to its distinct political and cultural relevance. By featuring a live, yet still scripted presidential candidate debate at the same time as real-world presidential debates, actors Alan Alda and Jimmy Smits were able to mimic the political clashes actually captivating the nation. Though *The West Wing* was already critically lauded as a quality network drama, this textual incorporation of real-world issues and events helped further cement the program as superiorly viable, fresh and full of “moments of truth” even in light of its sub-par ratings (Brioux 66). Given this historical context, *30 Rock*’s “Live Show” adds another interesting layer to the live tradition, positioning its break from the series’ previously recorded episodes not as “stunt” programming or programming loftily aimed at being socially or politically relevant. Instead, “Live Show” is positioned as a “fun” reward for fans that repeatedly underscores the quality of the series through its many live-related deviances. But how did fans and critics react, and does ensuing discourse about “Live Show” support this analysis of its paratextual significance?

After both versions of the live episode aired, critics and fans on sites like the *A.V. Club*, *Vulture* and *Slate* began critiquing the event and the unique experience of watching

*30 Rock*'s narrative and characters in such a different and supposedly "unpredictable" context. While many simply liked the show and enjoyed the brief retreat from the usual format, a number of individuals explicitly highlighted the way the live *30 Rock* experience enhanced their appreciation for the series and its actors, while also underscoring its unmatched televisual excellence in the ways previously discussed. Because the two versions of the live episode really did not feel like true *30 Rock* entities, the discourse surrounding the episode treated it as something that, like the reviews themselves, exists in relation to, but ultimately outside, the text. For example, Hank Stuever of the *Washington Post* called the episode "admirable" and characterized the live feel of the episode as "the comforting video tones of an episode of *SNL* [*Saturday Night Live*]" ("TV Review"). More importantly, however, Stuever posited that live *30 Rock* "will [ultimately] remind us wayward fans how much fun *30 Rock* can be to watch." Once again, the purpose of the live episode becomes important in relation to its effect on our viewing of the series outside of the live event, drawing viewers back to the "quality" series in its regular format. Therefore, "Live Show" can remain, for certain audiences, a paratextually perceived entity that highlights the merits of *30 Rock* rather than simply existing as just another part of the *30 Rock* text. Commenters on Stuever's review also pointed out the way the live episode made them appreciate the regular incarnation of the series, mostly because of what they felt was an inferior result when *30 Rock* was placed in the live context. Reader rpaulsondc wrote, "it had a Seventies sitcom feel that just didn't work for me...I fully expect a strong comeback [in next week's episode]." Ultimately, this comment reveals how the experience of watching live *30 Rock* left some

viewers, particularly those who have been fans of the show for a long time, anxiously awaiting a return to form by the series. While many were excited to see their favorite stars and former *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present) cast members, like Tina Fey and Tracy Morgan “do it live,” the event was repeatedly characterized in online discourse as “*SNL* lite” due to “Live Show” being broadcast from the *SNL* studio, and the episode as a whole failing to capture the frenetic pace and quality tone of *30 Rock* at large due to logistical restraints (set changes, for example).

While a number of commenters on blogs like the *A.V. Club* and critics from publications like the *Washington Post* enjoyed “Live Show” simply because it was an uncharacteristic event, a number of commenters stated that they found the experience offensively boring, un-engaging or irregularly “sub-standard” for the series (d\_r\_king, “TV Review”). In general, these complaints stem from the way live *30 Rock*, as previously mentioned, appeared less cinematic, worked to address and devalue the pleasure-filled experience of “breaking” and the way that live audience laughter encouraged viewers’ passive enjoyment and hampered actors’ dialogue speed.

Having two different “Live Show” episodes to dissect, however, allowed many fans the ability to enjoy finding the nuances between each episode (especially after NBC posted both live versions online for viewers to freely access). The *30 Rock* writers did, after all, try to entice returning viewers and fans by altering or even replacing jokes in the West Coast broadcast, allowing audience members the agency to find all of the differences between both episodes and revel in that unique experience. In fact, viewing an alternate version of “Live Show” feels more like watching the “Special Features”

segment of a *30 Rock* DVD since the West Coast version contained “deleted scenes” or alternate takes that never aired live on the East Coast (and could only be viewed later via online stream). Also, the fact that the revised or wholly new jokes were often just as funny as those aired in the East Coast broadcast further underscores the quality of the *30 Rock* writing staff, an ideal example being the Dr. Drew Baird hand transplant commercials previously discussed in this chapter. A number of fans even created their own comparative YouTube videos after both versions aired, cutting together the different takes and making quality comparisons based on the inconsistencies in the comment section. Comparing the two episodes and finding their unique differences constitutes another form of the usual mythological and intertextual work constantly required to fully decode a *30 Rock* episode. But because the live format logistically constrained the ability of the text to achieve its usual intellectual superiority and emphasis on rewarding culturally knowledgeable viewers, critics and fans made a concerted effort to fully unpack “Live Show” and to understand its overall significance.

Finally, while some would argue it as a mere coincidence, the fact that *Splitsider*’s Erik Voss embarked on an attempt to quantitatively prove *30 Rock*’s regular quality and superiority over other primetime sitcom fare immediately after the airing of “Live Show” is also worth noting. On November 8, 2010, Voss posted a comparative study he had conducted entitled, “Proving Scientifically that *30 Rock* is Better than *##!* *My Dad Says*.” In the online post, Voss outlines the intricate methodology he used to compare the two sitcoms that air in direct competition on Thursday nights, with the William Shatner vehicle *##!* *My Dad Says* (SMDS) (2010-present), consistently

dominating the timeslot in overall ratings and total viewers. Even the *30 Rock* live event's 6.6 million viewers could not compete with *SMDS*' 10.1 million the same night, according to *Splitsider*'s Adam Frucci. Voss began his scientific investigation of the two shows and quest to prove *30 Rock*'s objective superiority with the episode "Reaganing," which was the first new, regular format episode to air after "Live Show." Counting the number of jokes and storylines on two episodes each of *30 Rock* and *\$#! My Dad Says* (the episodes that aired competitively on October 20, 2010 and November 4, 2010), Voss used nine comparative categories to make his assessment: storylines, story overlaps, verbal jokes, visual gags, callbacks (when a show cashes in on a previously set up joke), reveals (twists), cultural references (intertextuality), run time and laugh track time. If a specific line, image or joke worked on multiple levels within one of the two shows, Voss counted it in multiple ways. Otherwise, Voss simply kept an extensive tally of all the ways both shows operated according to his methodological framework and then compared the two after analyzing all the raw data. Ultimately, Voss found that *30 Rock* dominates *SMDS* not only in sheer amount of jokes per episode (which is not an accurate indicator of "quality" or intellectual superiority), but also in the variety of types of humor, since *SMDS* relies heavily on verbal jokes. Also, *SMDS* generally lacks any intertextuality whatsoever, failing to ever reference broader culture in either of the two episodes Voss studied. Finally, *30 Rock* fits almost twice as much storytelling into a single episode than does *SMDS*, ultimately causing Voss to label *SMDS* "dumber and lazier" than *30 Rock*. Obviously, Voss makes a number of taste-based quality judgments due to his findings that ultimately position *30 Rock* as a higher quality text than *SMDS*.

The fact that Voss' effort to quantitatively qualify *30 Rock* as a superior text comes directly after *30 Rock* took a form similar to that of *SMDS* is especially interesting due to the already explored way critics and viewers saw "Live Show" as more of a paratext to the series, pushing them to re-enter and evaluate *30 Rock* as "quality TV." As Voss' elaborate study demonstrates, *30 Rock* is more broadly nuanced in narrative and humor than its primetime counterparts. In constructing a deviant kind of "just for fun," self-made paratext that attracted a larger number of viewers, *30 Rock*'s producers were able to showcase a text that succeeds as both an enjoyable television event and, more valuably, helps further position the series as a defense-worthy "quality" text by pushing viewers to realize and promote its usually superior formal and narrative components.

In the end, there are a number of ways *30 Rock*'s live experiment was able to position itself as a text paratextually relevant to the series itself. Through a return to a more conventional sitcom aesthetic, a more subdued, laughter-punctuated narrative and audience reception that described the live episode of *30 Rock* as a text more important in contrast to the series as a whole, "Live Show" is able to comparatively bolster the series and its quality-connoting merits. By engaging in a close analysis of the episode and the discourse of its reception paratexts, and then further contextualizing those readings within the history of live stunts and the academic discourse of "quality TV," it becomes clear how a deviant segment of a text can function paratextually to a series text overall via media and fan discourse across platforms. In today's post-network landscape overflowing with media texts, perhaps the producers of *30 Rock* have found a new, more effective way to highlight the quality-connoting merits of unconventional (or perhaps simply under

watched) televisual forms. By offering viewers a purposeful glimpse of the text in a more conventional aesthetic and narrative mode that supports passive rather than active viewing, live *30 Rock* is able to underscore the engaging nature of its more cinematic and complex “natural” state, ultimately revitalizing the series’ consideration within the discourse of “quality TV.” In addition, the series was able to offer viewers a variant form of *30 Rock* entertainment, which, based on the fact the series decided to stage a second live episode in season six, proved to be a successful formula for the series in terms of ratings, creativity and “quality.”



## Chapter 2: “Treat Yo Self” to “Quality TV” with *Parks and Recreation*’s Brand of Sentimental Comedy

According to *Entertainment Weekly*, *Parks and Recreation* (*Parks and Rec*) was the “smartest” comedy on television in February 2011. The cover story, which inexplicably depicted the show’s characters on an African safari both on the cover and in the internal photo spread, explained that the series had transformed from an underwhelming sitcom from *The Office* creators into a full-fledged comedy contender populated by fully realized characters and driven by “sharper” comedy. While this bold “smartest” statement surely sold some shoppers on buying the magazine, *EW* never defines what it means by “smartest” comedy, instead opting to tout the show based on the 101 reasons it loves each of its eight main characters – Leslie Knope, Ron Swanson, Ann Perkins, Chris Traeger, Tom Haverford, Andy Dwyer, April Ludgate and Ben Wyatt. These reasons, however, leave the reader guessing as to what the magazine’s writers mean by “TV’s smartest sitcom.” For example, reason number 40 on the list is that Ann Perkins (Leslie’s best friend, played by Rashida Jones) is “hot,” and reason number 12 to watch the show, in relation to the character Ron Swanson, is simply “the moustache.” Overall, while the rationales *EW* offers readers to convince them to watch *Parks and Rec* are humorous and also intrinsically tied to the characters of the show, the magazine never finds reason to explicitly justify why the show is the “smartest” or one of the best on television. Therefore, in this chapter I will investigate the narrative of and motivation behind *Parks and Recreation* in order to discern its “smart” and “quality” associated

comedy elements (according to critics). I will also analyze marginal texts, such as newspaper reviews and website posts, to determine how and why critics, journalists and fans work to describe and position the show as uniquely optimistic, sentimental and, in the end, “quality.” Because *Parks and Rec*, unlike *30 Rock*, made a turn towards “quality” after its first season rather than being described that way from inception, it will also be necessary to investigate how the series has been characterized and critiqued over time, as well as how a single episode from one of the show’s most recent seasons exemplifies its now higher “quality” existence according to the discourse of critics and fans.

*Parks and Recreation* debuted as part of the Thursday night comedy lineup on NBC in April 2009 and was quickly met with critical “indifference” (Snierston 44). Many critics questioned whether audiences needed or wanted another mockumentary sitcom in the style of *The Office* (and cinematic mockumentaries made popular by director and star Christopher Guest, such as *Waiting for Guffman* (1996)), and the overarching plot of the season, in which Amy Poehler’s lead character, Leslie Knope, tried to get a pit turned into a park, was labeled both unsustainably simple and tirelessly overwrought. While online popular culture criticism site the *A.V. Club* gave *Parks and Rec*’s pilot episode a grade of B+ (a promising start for a show that was not “all the way there yet” according to critic Keith Phipps), ensuing episodes from season one regularly received grades of C, C+ and B- from that site. Even though season one contained only six episodes, the general *A.V. Club* consensus was that *Parks and Rec* was a show that needed to make its lead character Leslie more likeable and its small-town world more complex in order to

become a successful, compelling sitcom. In his review for season one's sixth and final episode, entitled "Rock Show," Phipps highlights the remarks of a reader who wrote in the comment section of a previous episode, "this show is going to be widely beloved by the end of season 2, and everybody will go back and watch season 1 and like it way more than they do now." Phipps agreed with that statement, believing that "Rock Show" revealed *Parks and Rec* as a show that could develop into a series with the right mix of "bitterness and pathos," elsewhere defined as the best balance "off-kilter and sweetly optimistic humor" according to *EW*'s Snierston. Phipps, it seems, was correct, as *Parks and Rec* has developed into not only one of the most watched comedies on ratings-starved NBC (easily attaining a 5.6 rating for episodes during season three according to *EW*), but also one of the most widely discussed sitcoms in print and on the Web, as this chapter will detail.

Prior to delving too deeply into the appeal of *Parks and Rec* and its positioning as a "quality" show based on its formal and narrative attributes, it is first necessary to explain the central conflicts of the show through the lens of the singular episode I will use to exemplify the series' "smart" and "quality" traits. As previously mentioned, *Parks and Rec* centers around the Parks and Recreation department in the small town of Pawnee, Indiana. In the season four episode I have chosen to analyze, simply titled "Pawnee Rangers," department leader Leslie Knope's Girl Scouts-like group the Pawnee Goddesses stands in direct competition with office curmudgeon Ron Swanson's Pawnee Rangers – a boy scout-like troop of local boys whom Ron is trying to teach to be men. While Leslie hands out badges to her group and encourages them to have fun, make crafts

and eat candy in a luxurious cabin, Ron tries to teach his rangers real-world survival tips, such as building a shelter out of a cardboard box and canvas and sitting in silence while eating a cold can of beans. When one Ranger decides that he would rather be a Pawnee Goddess and eat candy than be bored with Ron eating beans, Leslie denies him from her club but proclaims herself victorious over Ron since she started the Goddesses when she wasn't allowed to be a Ranger as a child.

In the show's simultaneous B-story, office workers Tom Haverford and Donna Meagle are celebrating "Treat Yo Self 2011," a day during which they buy themselves whatever they want from extravagant spa treatments to fine leather goods. The two reluctantly decide to invite office nerd Ben Wyatt (played by Adam Scott) to join them since he is still reeling from his break-up with Leslie, and they ultimately teach him to live a little by treating himself to an authentic Batman suit complete with cape and utility belt. Ultimately, Leslie and her Goddesses also decide to let the Rangers join their club, bringing harmony back to Pawnee and restoring Leslie and Ron's tentative friendship. Overall, this episode highlights Ron and Leslie's ongoing comedic conflict as compelling character foils while also allowing viewers to further revel in Tom's over-the-top desire for luxury and Ben's passionate nerdiness. Though the episode only received a B- from current *Parks and Rec A.V. Club* reviewer Steve Heisler (uncharacteristically low for season four episodes), many fans took to the comment section to defend the episode's plotlines and its depiction of their favorite characters. Commenter Something Clever specifically wrote, "I LITERALLY could not believe it when I checked here, [that] an episode featuring Adam Scott crying in a Batman suit only got a B-."

While the previous chapter revealed that *30 Rock* is touted as “quality TV” due to its cinematic style, complex narratives and intertextuality, *Parks and Rec*, has largely become revered, as the *EW* cover story’s structure and commenter reaction allude, due to the appealingly outlandish and endearing nature of its characters. To underscore, however, *Parks and Rec* has the “cinematic” lineage characteristically tied to “quality TV” due to its mockumentary style and handheld cinéma vérité aesthetic that heightens the sense of reality in the fictional world of Pawnee (whose Parks Department is being profiled by a still unnamed documentary crew). The series is also “quality” tied due to its “complex narrative” that utilizes both season-long story arcs and episodic plots, such as the dueling scout troops of “Pawnee Rangers” (Mittell 29). But its characters are repeatedly the element of the series that has critics, fans and journalists alike willing to position *Parks and Rec* as one of the best comedies and overall shows on contemporary U.S. television. Compelling characters, of course, are the result of both good writing and good acting. Poehler, for example, has been touted by the likes of the *A.V. Club*, *Slate* and even award shows, such as the golden Globes and the Emmys, as the premiere, recognition-worthy actor on the show – not only because she plays the sitcom’s primary character Knope, but also because she does so “with both dignity *and* humor” (Jones “Q + LA”). It is characters like Knope, in other words, and specifically the actors who play them, that make *Parks and Rec* a superior series because they make it equally entertaining and endearing.

While the *EW* reporter asserts the importance of *Parks and Rec*’s characters by actually offering specific reasons why each character’s attributes and voice make the

show worth watching, other critics have keyed in on the purposefully and believably optimistic nature of most of Pawnee's inhabitants as a marker of difference from other NBC comedies, and, in turn, one of the show's distinctive "quality" elements. For example, a post by Mike Barthel that ran on *The Awl* in May titled, "The Weird, Frictionless Politics of *Parks and Recreation*," begins by considering the series as an "upbeat" and therefore very "twee" show thanks to its great writing and acting. For Barthel, the word "twee" adequately describes the highly passionate and childlike nature of the show's characters – from Leslie's undying love for waffles to Ann's perennial bafflement by men. Willa Paskin of *New York Magazine*'s Vulture blog even went so far as to posit that *Parks and Rec* is a "comedy of super niceness" in relation to shows like *30 Rock* that are "comedies of discomfort" because we laugh and grimace at uncomfortable situations. As Paskin points out, *Parks and Rec* has "abandoned mining the uncomfortable for laughs, in order to explore the comedic potential of super nice people." This "nice" characterization of a *Parks and Rec* is worth noting, especially because it underwrites the traditionally cynical connotations of the narrative form of mockumentary and signals its evolution in culture and "quality."

These "nice" character and narrative descriptions also ultimately help map *Parks and Recreation*'s "quality" transition after season one, most notably through the growth and change of main character Leslie Knope, who developed into a more rounded character thanks to the show's writing and Poehler's acting. Because *Parks and Rec* began as an "*Office* clone" (Paskin "Super Nice"), Leslie was initially a shallow Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell) knock-off – deeply flawed, incompetent and always likely

to say the wrong thing. However, over the course of season two, Leslie became both more competent and kinder to the quirky characters around her, in turn making her character less abrasive. Of course, Leslie still sets impossibly high standards for herself and those around her that help determine the possibilities and stakes of each episode (the Pawnee Goddesses *must* destroy the Pawnee Rangers, for example), but overall, the series has transformed into a world populated by “good people” that viewers can easily love.

Because *30 Rock*’s egotistical and uncomfortable characters exist easily within the contemporary sitcom reality (at least on NBC), *Parks and Rec*’s championing of “good old fashion niceness” helps position it and its characters as a throwback “to a simpler sitcom era” (Paskin “Super Nice). In fact, Leslie Knope seems to share a lot more in common with Mary Tyler Moore than Liz Lemon, especially when it comes to niceness. In a podcast interview with comedian Marc Maron, Amy Poehler discussed her character as an uncharacteristically virtuous contemporary network sitcom woman who is simultaneously hard to make fun of and incredibly easy to laugh at (Maron “Amy Poehler”). “Playing earnestness,” she says, “leads to more comedy,” and that earnestness, to the point of parody, is something that is not widely found on contemporary NBC shows and sitcoms outside of *Parks and Rec*. In fact, Kenneth the Paige from *30 Rock*, who is the most unflinchingly earnest character on that show (and perhaps on TV in general), would fit more comfortably in Pawnee than he does at 30 Rockefeller Plaza.

Furthermore, tracking the evolution of *Parks and Rec* via Leslie’s character is useful in terms of the “quality TV” discourse because, in some ways, Leslie exists as a

type of “unruly woman” (Rowe 83) whose feminist qualities, which are parodied most excessively in the first season of the series, help align the show with “quality TV” forbearers, such as *Mary Tyler Moore*. Going back to Kirsten Marthe Lentz’s “Quality vs. Relevance,” it is again possible to see the comparison between a show like *Parks and Recreation* and other 1970s “quality” MTM sitcoms due to the connection of such series to issues of gender rather than “relevant” social issue-related programming and discourse. Overall, Leslie’s developed earnestness since season one helps make her a more relatable, rounded female character, and her development has also pushed the series to divert overtly feminist messages away from her and into other still compelling realms of the show. In season four, for example, April, Andy and Ron attend an Intro to Women’s Studies class at a local community college, where they learn about societal establishments created solely to oppress women in a less strident image of academic feminism than you usually see on TV (Becker “Clip Library”). Rather than making Knope an in-your-face spokeswoman for feminist issues, a tactic which might turn off viewers, the series has made feminism a topic directly addressed beyond the example of her strong female character, endowing the series with greater depth without dampening its message.

The consistently earnest nature of *Parks and Recreation* also lends itself, in contrast, to some of the series’ other “quality” related comedy signifiers – eccentricity, excess and parody. As Henri Bergson points out in his investigation of comedy, “On Laughter,” laughter is not simply an expression of delight, but rather a complex reaction to “eccentricity” and an effort to cause society to resemble a more accepting and



inclusive community (73). All of the characters on *Parks and Rec* are comically eccentric in their optimism (or cynicism, when it comes to April), but the show also makes their optimism so excessive that viewers are able to revel in the absurdity of each character's passion and their position in the off-kilter realm of Pawnee. Viewers such as the previously cited commenter Something Clever, for instance, loved "Pawnee Rangers" because it gave viewers a glimpse of Ben as an extremely passionate Batman fan whose way of treating himself is to buy an authentic and absurdly expensive bat suit. In cases like this one, excess is highlighted to great comedic effect as well as in a way that underscores the mockumentary style of the show and its regular use of parody, which both pleasurably emphasize the series' improvisational nature. For example, when Tom and Donna explain what "Treat Yo Self 2011" is to the audience, they both look directly at the camera and musically recite a list of things that are acceptable to treat yourself to. Not only do the characters break the fourth wall by directly addressing the camera and viewers of the show, but also they also directly emphasize the excessive nature of the practice of treating yourself, which is something their characters do on a regular basis.

The parody inherent in Tom and Donna's excessive "Treat Yo Self 2011" campaign is also a good example of the show's use of absurdity, authenticity and satire to exploit what Jonathan Gray calls "critical intertextuality" (227). As explored in chapter one's look at *30 Rock*, intertextuality has become an important "quality TV" marker along with self-reference and cinematic aesthetics, and for Gray, "good parody aims to teach and correct" (227). However, *Parks and Rec*'s repeated reliance on parody for humor when it comes to mocking local government or even national politics (as in the

major narrative arc of season four – Leslie’s campaign for mayor of Pawnee) also helps further cement the show within discussions of “quality” comedy and “quality TV” by making the show both entertaining and culturally relevant. For Harries, parody is characterized by the movement between similarity to and difference from a target. Therefore, parody must be grounded by recognizable settings, characters or iconography in order to operate successfully (Harries 9). While critics such as *Grantland*’s Andy Greenwald applaud *30 Rock* for being a “finely tuned joke machine” that defines itself via incessant intertextuality, *Parks and Rec* stands as a distinct, “superior” comedy because it balances both parody and inclusion, as Harries suggests. In other words, Pawnee is populated by a cast of bold and regularly outlandish characters, but as a whole it also remains a place that makes characters and viewers feel welcome due to its small-town charm, “logical absurdity” (Harries 9) and “gentle pace” (Greenwald).

While excess is often (at least theoretically) associated with melodrama and humor of the grotesque (Bakhtin 303), *Parks and Rec* utilizes excess as an integral part of its exaggerated “comedy of niceness” thanks to Pawnee’s ever-inclusive community. This practice further separates *Parks and Recreation* from its contemporary sitcom and comedy counterparts, allowing critics and fans alike to promote the show as both different and, in many cases, “better.” Greenwald of *Grantland*, for example, calls *Parks and Rec* “quality” because it is a show that week-to-week is based on “warm humor, subtle character beats [and] sly satire.” For Greenwald, “smart and competent doesn’t always win in the end,” which is why he believes the series is regularly “taken for granted.” While Emily Nussbaum of *New York* magazine didn’t rank *Parks and*

*Recreation* in her year-end top ten list, she made a point to argue that network television is currently studded with “great” and “potent” half-hour comedies, specifically citing *Parks and Recreation* as an example. Finally, Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* made a place for *Parks and Rec* on his “Best TV of 2010” list (at #7) due to its position as Thursday night’s “least sarcastic or cynical sitcom” and the “vulnerability and zaniness” found within every character. This brief survey of television criticism and year-end lists reveals *Parks and Recreation*’s discursive place near the top of the “quality TV” heap, with many directly citing the show’s distinctions, in both earnestness and excess, as the reason for its place within the “quality TV” discussion.

From a production perspective, showrunner and former *Office* writer Michael Schur has also regularly pointed to *Parks and Rec*’s “sweetness” as its key ingredient. In addition, he has also repeatedly pointed to his personal love of the sitcom *Cheers* when qualifying *Parks and Rec*’s success both critically and commercially as a “nice” comedy. In an interview with Kera Bolonik of *New York* magazine, Schur admits that the reason he thinks the show works, and its characters do not come off too cheesy in their childlike passions, is casting “quality” actors who are “just funny and compelling and good” (Bolonik “Showrunner Transcript”). Once again, it all comes back to the characters when assessing the series’ strengths and ability to function as a “comedy of niceness” on an NBC comedy schedule currently filled with much the opposite. Therefore, not only do actors such as Amy Poehler, Nick Offerman and Adam Scott have the talent to carry nuanced characters, but also the “quality” pedigrees to help viewers immediately associate the show with other “quality” fare. For example, Scott’s most recent television

work includes the under-watched but critically acclaimed Starz comedy *Party Down*, Poehler has long been associated with “quality” comedy thanks to her work on *Saturday Night Live* (for which she won an Emmy in 2010), and Offerman even appeared briefly on the HBO drama *Deadwood*. These “quality TV” connotations allow fans to draw immediate intertextual connections between *Parks and Rec* and other “quality” programs based on star status and their own cultural knowledge.

According to creator Schur, his utmost responsibility, as the creator and writer of a network TV show is “to make people happy and to entertain them,” and that philosophy helps dictate the optimistic tone and narrative of the show (Bolonik “Showrunner Transcript”). Schur also validates the critical assessment of *Parks and Rec* as a sort of sitcom throwback in describing his reverence for *Cheers*, which featured a “sweet sensibility and surrogate-family characters” similar to that of *Parks and Rec* (Wolk “Master Class”). For Schur, the best ideas for TV comedies are “lo-fi ideas” that are not wholly revolutionary. Therefore, the thing that pushes a television comedy into the realm of “quality,” at least in his opinion, is not necessarily its narrative complexity or contemporary cinematic style, but instead its ability to present viewers with series that are “just about great characters” (Wolk “Master Class”). *Parks and Rec* may not challenge and reward viewers with relentless intertextuality or take narrative complexity to the extreme with an elaborate mythology like *30 Rock* does, but it inserts itself into the “quality TV” conversation by consciously allowing viewers to occupy a comedic, largely nonsensical “green world” (Frye 456) that is regulated by an alternate set of rules and populated by relatable, yet excessively positive and good-natured characters. In other

words, Pawnee is a constructed realm where parody and excess become normal, and its characters are made all the more realistic and, in the end, comedic, due to the documentary aesthetic of the series and its insular workplace environment. In fact, the do-gooder tone of the series is even further underscored by the show's bouncy opening theme song, which sounds more like the theme music from a commercial for the Girl Scouts or a documentary on the town of Pawnee than a primetime network comedy.

Poehler's influence, as co-creator of Knope's character, is also integral. She ended her career at Saturday Night Live playing the rigid, uptight Hillary Clinton, and transitioned to playing the endlessly optimistic, yet ever-evolving Knope. Poehler was raised in what she has called a "very blue-collar town," and she continues to use that upbringing, as well as her propensity for clubs and activities in high school, as the basis of Knope's heartfelt pride in her roots and endearing tenacity. "If you were to do a Venn Diagram comparing Amy Poehler and Leslie Knope, there are a few things that you would find in the middle," Poehler recently told NPR's *Monkey See*. Therefore, not only is Schur's influence and drive to create a series that harkens back to "nice" sitcoms like *Cheers* an important foundational element and explanation for *Parks and Rec*'s style of narrative, but also actors like Poehler's effort and talent to present viewers with well-rounded, identifiable characters that also happen to be funny.

While Schur has discussed his creative process at length and his vision for *Parks and Recreation*, which remains heavily influenced by his love for the good natured foundation of *Cheers*, he also openly cites the process and perils of writing a television show during a time when the Internet has become a sounding board for fans and anti-fans

alike. As Schur necessarily points out, “the Internet is not at all a representative sampling of America...if you care enough to comment on a message board, you either really love the show or you really hate the show” (Bolonik “Showrunner Transcript”). Of course, sites like the *A.V. Club* where some viewers go to talk about *Parks and Recreation* are not places to find out what a majority of viewers think about the series, especially because most of the people who comment on that site are engaging with the text in a way that not all viewers do (i.e., commenting on weekly criticism and participating in conversation with other fans and, at times, the critic who wrote the initial review of the episode). But Schur goes on to make a point worth highlighting about the making of *Parks and Rec*. He notes, referring to himself and his writing team, “you’re not making the show for people who either really love it or really hate it. Those are the margins” (“Showrunner Transcript”). Here, Schur points to targeting the section of the TV viewing audience that media creators do not consider what CarrieLynn Reinhard calls the “audience-as-pusher,” or avid consumer advocate (9). Instead, Schur advocates making *Parks and Rec* for the “audience-as-agent,” hoping to attract viewers engaged with the media who will choose to watch the series based not only on its “quality” aesthetic and narrative attributes, but its general similarities to traditionally revered and well-liked sitcoms, like Schur’s beloved *Cheers* (Reinhard 6).

Schur’s comments on the show ultimately functioning as baseline entertainment, however, also help further delineate *Parks and Rec* within the “quality TV” discourse, which, especially when it comes to academic scholarship, is discussed as a realm where “quality” television regularly challenges its viewers in both form and content. Just as Jane

Feuer and Horace Newcomb have pointed out, artistic and highly cinematic aesthetics are an integral part of the “quality” discourse today when it comes to shows like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*. But *Parks and Rec*’s cinematic ancestry is separate due to its parody of documentary style reality TV. Therefore, we may still be able to talk about the “cinematization of television” (Newman 2) when it comes to *Parks and Rec*, but ultimately the show’s “quality TV” status is tied more to its characters and successfully upbeat world than any elite-attracting aesthetics. While many commenters on the *A.V. Club* argue about *30 Rock*’s “Live Show” and other episodes as “quality” specifically in terms of the show’s formal qualities (quick cuts, use of single camera, flashback montages), commenters for *Parks and Rec* quibble over the strength of B-story plotlines and character development. For example, running threads in the “Pawnee Rangers” comment section on the *A.V. Club* discussed the overall grade Heisler gave the episode in relation to the series’ best episodes, other lower rated episodes, and the many comedic uses of Ben’s nerdiness (ultimately dubbed a rewarding character trait rather than mere joke thanks to his Batman suit cry in “Pawnee Rangers”). While this is not to say that *30 Rock* fans do not discuss the show’s characters in their comments, it is useful to note how conversations differ, especially when it comes to arguing for the overall quality of the show and its justification with a specific grade.

Further, it is easy to assume that the creators of a show, be it on a major network or cable, work with their most devoted or even just their most vocal fans in mind due to the prevalence of viewer reaction on the Internet – especially as shows like *Glee* actually take storylines and foster relationships in the narrative based on fan response and

interaction in online forums. But Schur's perspective on the perils of the Internet for showrunners like himself not only drives home the point that any analysis of online viewer response is limited at best, but also sets *Parks in Recreation* once again in contrast to a show like *30 Rock*, which created a live show specifically to reward its fans according to creator and star Tina Fey. The viewers that got the most out of that stunt are, arguably, those most familiar with *30 Rock* to begin with and who could notice all the differences between a regularly shot and staged episode and the live one (not to mention seek out and compare the differences between the East and West Coast versions). Therefore, Schur's comments expose the delicate balance creators of "quality"-deemed programs must strike between targeting a "quality" audience, consisting of viewers who participate in online critical commentary and watch other "quality" shows, and a mass audience looking for television entertainment and engaging with the text in different, yet still valuable ways.

In the end, determining how *Parks and Recreation* was able to transcend its initially tepid response from critics and fans alike to become one of the most talked about and "smartest" shows on television today is a project tied greatly to the elements of character – writing and acting – and narrative. As this chapter's analysis has demonstrated, from production down to audience response, the series' excessively optimistic and perennially "nice" characters help to distinguish and promote the sitcom from and over other comedy offerings on network and cable. Humor, of course, is also at the core of *Parks and Rec's* "quality" status, and it becomes clear upon the analysis of the series' media paratexts that viewers from a variety of subject positions see the show as a



hilarious exaggeration of small-town life and government practice that finds that right balance between relatable vulnerability and fictionalized insanity. Therefore, the series finds itself situated by viewers as an elite comedy series within the discourse of “quality TV” due mainly to its unique mode of comedy that hinges on optimism and excess, which is forwarded by its cast of likeable, quirky characters played by actors with influential paratextual ties to “quality” media texts.

Overall, *Parks and Recreation*’s ties to “quality” lie not only in the series’ cinematic aesthetic and characters, but also in the history and talent of those involved with the program, whose form and narrative are also rooted in another contemporary “quality TV” show – *The Office*. Ultimately, this closely related televisual text influences the discursive bodies of knowledge critics, journalists and viewers draw on to qualify *Parks and Recreation* as superior within the discourse of “quality TV.” These statements of “quality” are ultimately laden with meaning and truth because of their frequent social circulation. By looking once again at historical instances where the term “quality” (and related words, such as “best,” “smartest” or “funniest” in terms of comedy) has been mobilized, we can analyze not only what can be said about contemporary television programs, but also who can join the conversation. A closer look at a contemporary network sitcom, in this case *Parks and Rec*, also helps reveal how the nuanced discussion of “quality TV” operates within public discourse and how taste cultures form around certain programs thanks to parallels in rhetoric between the mass media and viewers response. As Foucault points out, “discourse finds a way of limiting its domain, of defining what it is talking about, of giving it the status of an object – and therefore of

making it manifest, nameable and describable” (41). Ultimately, *Parks and Rec* stands as a unique entity in contemporary television, especially in terms of NBC, because it relies on optimism, inclusion and sentimentality while still managing to assert itself, through writing, acting, aesthetics and fan and critic discourse, as “quality TV.”

### **Chapter 3: Getting the Moments Just Right While Combining “Relevance” and “Quality” on *Parenthood***

On September 14, 2010, the second season premiere of the NBC comedy-drama *Parenthood* (2009-present), a series loosely adapted from the 1989 Ron Howard film of the same name, aired on national television. After a tumultuous first season that included the six-month delay of the series' premiere when original cast member Maura Tierney dropped out to receive breast cancer treatment, *Parenthood* found solid ratings amongst the youngest and most valuable demographic, 18-49, cementing its spot on the NBC primetime slate. With actress Lauren Graham replacing Tierney as one of the adult Braverman siblings alongside actors Peter Krause, Dax Shepard and Erika Christensen, the series provides what *Entertainment Weekly* calls “a touching and relatable” look at contemporary family life and parenting (Karger 62). Within the series' recurring narrative are a number of modern, unconventional depictions of the struggles of family life and “raising kids in the post-Facebook, post-iPod world” (Schneider 2). For example, while Krause's character Adam and his wife struggle weekly to raise their Asperger's-diagnosed son, Christensen's breadwinning wife and mother character Julia must constantly re-negotiate her relationship with her stay-at-home husband Joel, played by Sam Jaeger. These somewhat unique and contemporary struggles help position *Parenthood* as not only as a progressive, “quality” modern drama, but also as a valuable parenting handbook for middle-class U.S. parents in the twenty-first century. Paige Wiser

of the *Chicago Sun-Times* even lamented that “if *Parenthood* gets canceled, we’ll have to go back to buying parenting books that we’ll never read” (22).

While journalists like Wiser have cited the everyday relevance of the show and its parenting cues, television reviewers and viewers, especially after the end of *Parenthood*’s third season, have called the series, “one of television’s best dramas” (VanDerWerff “My Brother’s Wedding”). *A.V. Club* commenter and *Parenthood* viewer FalseRumorsDotCom also remarked after the series three finale, “There are many aspects of the show that remind me of the warmer moments of *Six Feet Under*...the fully fleshed out family intricacies that are so honest and occasionally brutal [are one example]” (“My Brother’s Wedding”). This comment points to the interesting balance *Parenthood* is able to strike between network TV conventionality and “quality” cable TV resonance, but can *Parenthood*’s relative ratings success and critical acclaim be attributed simply to what FalseRumorsDotCom refers to as “honest,” intricate images of modern family life? Or, is *Parenthood* a generally conventional depiction of familial patriarchy with a few bold contemporary elements and the unnatural ability to “keep [so many narrative] balls in the air” (VanDerWerff “My Brother’s Wedding”)?) This final chapter will explore not only how *Parenthood* ultimately works as a conventional network drama through the dominance of patriarchy, but also how the show’s comedic elements and contemporary familial storylines position the show as a sort of coming together of Kristen Marthe Lentz’s theories on “quality” and “relevant” TV. “Relevant” TV, by Lentz’s definition, is television that offers a “complete” or “real” image of society by addressing contemporary social issues and “controversial subjects” about people generally un- or underrepresented

on television, an expectation that dates back to the 1970s and the politically charged sitcoms of Norman Lear (57). In other words, “relevance” television is a type of programming that is more responsive to the social and political milieu of society and grounds the televisual image in the “authentic” referential via realistic representation that speaks for classes and communities that did not have the opportunity to speak before (Lentz 47). While Lentz ultimately links “relevance programming” to authentic televisual representations of race and race-related subjects in her article, her theory and its attachment to both social and political relevance on TV allows for its application to a study of *Parenthood* because of the show’s focus on representing, with truth, contemporary social topics, particularly raising a child with Autism, that are regularly ignored on television. In addition, *Parenthood*’s writers also choose to explore “relevant” issues of race and socioeconomic class in season two, when Adam Braverman’s teenage daughter, Haddie, enters into a season-spanning interracial relationship with an African-American youth named Alex (played by *Friday Night Lights*’ Michael B. Jordan) that she meets while repeatedly volunteering at a local homeless shelter. *Parenthood*’s style, on the other hand, helps continually link the series with “quality TV” and its discourse due to its cinematic lineage, which works to elevate the televisual aesthetic in general and continually position the NBC dramedy as a network television irregularity in style and narrative.

Therefore, it is important to begin by noting that one of the most consistently addressed aspects of the show, particularly in interviews with primary writer Jason Katims, is not the series’ content but the seemingly effortless, free-flowing style of

filming employed on set where three cameras are always rolling from various angles and improvisation is encouraged. This formal technique lends *Parenthood* a more genuine, voyeuristic feel, similar to that of Katims' other critically acclaimed "quality TV" NBC family drama *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011). But how does this "authentic" feel and emphasis on improvisation affect the series' narrative content and audience reception in ways similar to or different than *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation*, which I have already considered as series with similarly cinematic aesthetics? Can *Parenthood* be a uniquely progressive, "quality" domestic show in the contemporary televisual landscape while also successfully promoting dominant patriarchal discourses about the family also relevant for today's society? In order to understand the uniquely hybrid position of *Parenthood* and the way both its aesthetics and narrative are decoded by viewers, a close-reading of the season 2 premiere "I Hear You, I See You" will provide a nuanced look at the way form and content, and a combination of comedy and drama, help the show exist as both a conventionally relatable series and a relevantly valuable "quality" TV show. In addition, an analysis of the paratexts surrounding the show, such as print articles and reviews, cast and creator interviews, online reviews and viewer comments on popular culture blogs, will shed light on the way fans and critics decode the "quality" show simultaneously in such seemingly oppositional ways. Ultimately, I will argue that *Parenthood* is able to exist as a subjectively superior TV show and a conventionally satisfying drama because cinéma vérité aesthetics and a straightforward patriarchal narrative attract audiences from multiple niche categories, along with the series' pleasurable balance of comedic and dramatic elements. New media also allow viewers to encounter the *Parenthood* text (and

television in general) repeatedly and in more minute detail across multiple platforms and from multiple perspectives. For that reason, the series' narrative can, and arguably must, fall broadly back on patriarchal ideology, because the naturalistic handheld lens it is viewed through subtly pushes viewers to perceive the show and its authentic "moments" in a more enlightened "quality" mode that is ultimately grounded, especially in cross-platform discourse, by the series repeated emphasis on patriarchy in relation to "relevance" related topics.

Because *Parenthood* features a vast array of interconnected characters and storylines, a brief overview of the show and an informal navigation of the large Braverman family will prove useful prior to approaching the text's content and formal qualities. NBC.com even features a "Braverman Family Tree" so viewers can keep track of the large extended family from week to week. Essentially, *Parenthood* revolves around the exploits of the extended Braverman clan. Zeek and Camille Braverman, played by Craig T. Nelson and Bonnie Bedelia respectively, are the parents of four now-adult children: Adam, Sarah, Julia and Crosby. Adam, the oldest sibling, is married to wife Kristina and has two children – a high school-age daughter named Haddie and a young son with Asperger's named Max. Eldest daughter Sarah is a scattered single mom who recently moved back home with her son Drew and daughter Amber to live with Camille and Zeek after separating from her musician husband. Julia, the second-to-youngest Braverman child, is a workaholic lawyer while her husband Joel is a stay-at-home father to their young daughter Sydney. Finally, Crosby, the youngest sibling, is an aspiring music producer whose life of perennial bachelordom is interrupted when he finds out an

old fling named Jasmine got pregnant and gave birth to their son, whom she named Jabar. While Adam, Sarah and Julia struggle to balance work, their personal lives and family life, Crosby tries to come to grips with the existence of his son and now fatherhood in order to re-establish a relationship with the mother of his child. In addition, each Braverman must navigate close relationships not only with their siblings but also with their overbearing father Zeek and the marriage trouble he and wife Camille encounter over the course of the first season and then try to resolve in season two. Ultimately, Braverman patriarch Zeek and eldest son Adam act as the primary wisdom-givers within the family dynamic, having the last, or at least most potent, word on various parenting, relationship and family issues that arise.

The season two premiere of *Parenthood*, entitled “I Hear You, I See You,” ideally showcases the important roles Zeek and Adam play as authorities in the extended family dynamic and also repeatedly underscores the narrative dominance of patriarchy in light of some progressive domestic situations. The episode begins with Sarah discovering a leak in the roof of her room (which is in her parents’ guest house), which sends Zeek on an ill-informed mission to repair the damage. Immediately, Camille calls eldest son Adam (in her only substantial appearance in the entire episode), asking him to come over and convince his father to call a certified professional instead. In his own home and while constantly dealing with the needs of his son with Asperger’s, Adam is already dispensing advice to his youngest brother Crosby, whose son Jabar and mother Jasmine (who is now officially Crosby’s girlfriend) are living across the country in New York and are trying to make a visit back home to Berkeley to see Crosby. Immediately, Zeek and Adam’s roles



as problem solvers within the family, whether misguided or not, are highlighted, establishing their important function within the show's dominant patriarchal ideology. When Adam finally arrives at his parents' home to reign in his father, he encounters Sarah, who is struggling to get her kids ready for school and to find their shoes. Offhand, she suggests to Adam that his shoe company should make a shoe low jack for parents. Rather than calling a professional, Adam suggests that Julia's stay-at-home husband Joel, who is also a licensed contractor, come over and help Zeek with the leak. Later that day when pressured for ideas by his boss Gordon at work, Adam uses Sarah's low jack idea as his own and gains permission to develop the product, leading to Sarah's disappointment in his failure to acknowledge her. Meanwhile, Adam's wife Kristina has taken on the challenge of teaching their daughter Haddie to drive. However, Kristina's intense fears of Haddie getting in an accident make her irrational, sending Haddie to her father's office to ask for help. Sarah also seeks out guidance, this time from her father Zeek, about Adam's co-opting of her shoe idea. Zeek tells Sarah to see the value in her ideas and to take ownership of them, eventually leading to a confrontation with Adam and him solving the problem by offering her a job at his shoe company. To round out the hour-long episode, Adam and Kristina must try to help Max cope with the fact that his cousin Jabar cannot come from New York for a sleepover.

Overall, this episode contains some very recognizable familial television tropes, for example, a parent teaching a child to drive and a stubborn handyman father, in addition to more contemporary issues, like a stay-at-home dad dealing with his own sense of inadequacy and the challenges of raising a child with Asperger's. However, a

relatively in-depth look at the intertwining sub-plots of the episode reveals the patriarchal ideology regularly forwarded by *Parenthood* from the beginning of the season due to Zeek and Adam's constant roles as authorities and problem solvers. While the content is highly patriarchal in nature, taking into account the effect of the show's organic shooting and acting style is also necessary to understand how those ideological messages may be obscured or even knowingly discounted by viewers while watching.

When it comes to the series' naturalistic *vérité* feel and its perception as "realistic" family drama, the most prevalent elements that help conjure authenticity stylistically are the use of long shots and rotating camera angles, the presence of stereotypical domestic iconography and also the quick overlapping and blending of character dialogue in a very relatable, familial conversational mode. "I Hear You, I See You" provides numerous useful examples of these techniques, especially since the episode highlights various Braverman siblings approaching each other and their parents for help. For instance, toward the beginning of the episode when Crosby approaches older brother Adam for advice about his girlfriend and son now living on the East Coast, the scene is set in Adam's family's kitchen while the family is getting ready to head off to school and work for the day. The visual signs or iconography in the scene, such as personalized lunch pails and a refrigerator covered in family photos and the children's drawings, immediately connote family and the positive qualities of security and love stereotypically associated with it (Dyer 357). An introductory string of long shots and views from multiple handheld cameras are used to capture the familiar chaos as Adam and Kristina prep their children's lunches, Haddie prepares her own breakfast and all of

them converse with Crosby, who takes a seat at an island in front of the action. By framing the scene in such a way, viewers can see all of the actors on screen at once and have the freedom to choose what action, individual or iconography to focus on without the constant intrusion or manipulation of the camera. Of course, medium shots and close-ups are interspersed throughout the length of the scene to capture the key dialogue between Adam and Crosby as well as family member reactions to that conversation, but the point of view always eventually returns to a long shot of the entire event. Therefore, the actors also have greater freedom to move about the kitchen more fluidly because the three cameras and long shots employed can capture them as they travel in the space. This relative freedom for both actors and the viewer helps conjure a more authentic representation of the chaotic morning of a modern American family, especially when another family member intrudes. The use of handheld cameras throughout, which produce shots that visibly move and shake while capturing the action and transition from actor to actor without cutting, also connotes authenticity due to the association with amateur home video footage. In the end, viewers are allowed the option to survey the scene and the more realistic, homemade feel of the action and iconography captured rather than focusing specifically on the ideological messages therein.

As actors more naturally move in and out of the frame of the multiple cameras filming at once, the diegetic sound of their conversations is maintained even when they move off screen, also conveying an authentic conversational and even improvisational style. Later in the episode, for example, Haddie and Kristina return home from a driving lesson in which Haddie knocked off the car mirror by hitting a recycling bin on the side

of the road. Upon entering the house, mother and daughter begin fighting over the gravity of the event while conveying what happened to Adam and Max, who are sitting in the living room. Though the point of view fluctuates between long shots of Haddie and Kristina, a medium shot of Adam, long shots of the entire family and reaction shots of Max, the sounds of Haddie, Kristina and Adam arguing with and over each other can still be continuously heard in a very naturalistic manner. In other words, the improvisational style creator Katims emphasizes when discussing the way the show is created and filmed can be received due to the very realistic sound and rhetoric of the fight. As Haddie condescendingly pleads with her mother to “not make this into a thing,” Adam asks for clarification on the accident and Kristina recounts how the two are lucky to even be alive, the viewer is left to try to deduce each character’s point of view as the conversational cacophony progresses. Just like the series’ formal elements, the competing dialogue allows viewers multiple ways to interpret or approach the narrative while also highlighting the complex, multi-layered nature of actual family life and discourse. In a brief interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Peter Krause who plays Adam revealed that writer “Jason [Katims] wants you to get the *moments* just right, and not get hung up on the words necessarily” (Karger 62). This stated emphasis on feeling and in-the-moment acting by someone involved in the creation of the show further underscores the importance of authenticity in the show’s style and dialogue, which is understood by both the actors and, by extension, the audience through form and narrative as the scenes described above demonstrate. This emphasis, in combination with the show’s “quality

drama” aesthetic (Feuer 148), help situate *Parenthood* within the discourses of “relevant” and “quality” TV.

Before embarking on a more explicit analysis of *Parenthood*’s reception and a discussion of the effect its somewhat veiled patriarchal mythology has on viewers and the show’s “relevant” perception, it is also necessary to briefly consider some of the familial programming that precedes the series, the vast research that has been done on television families, and the patriarchal discourses that permeate family-centered TV programs and television in general. Television dramas, comedies and sitcoms have long relied on the dominant patriarchal ideology “in order to speak to the largest number of people” and keep variations in audience decoding to a minimum (Martín-Barbero 650). Because society is structured around patriarchy and the ultimate dominance of men in both the work and domestic spheres, popular family-based shows like *All in the Family* (1971-1979), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and *Family Ties* (1982-1989) reproduce the patriarchal ideology of society when structuring their programs around a stereotypically strong male father figure or “type,” like Archie Bunker, Cliff Huxtable or Steven Keaton (Dyer 355). In fact, in an article written by June and Timothy Frazer that compares the sitcom *Father Knows Best* to *The Cosby Show*, the two authors somewhat controversially argue that “gender roles and relationships are being portrayed in both programs as essentially the same” (166). Even though *The Cosby Show* features what many consider a progressive depiction of family life (an African-American nuclear family, two working parents where the mother is a successful lawyer and the father a successful doctor), the series overall still promotes “harmful” and restrictive gender stereotypes that can be

traced back to classic, conventional sitcoms (Frazer and Frazer 166). Classic, deeply patriarchal shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) “narrated the postwar experience” of the father-led nuclear family and helped establish the recognizable patriarchal stereotypes that still dominate television to this day (Douglas 91).

Touted as a sort of modern handbook for parents today, *Parenthood* also seems to “authentically” narrate and reflect the experience of the modern American family, which is still largely built on the realized foundation of patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles as “normalcy” (Dyer 355). *Parenthood* also aligns with Lentz’s diagnosis of “relevant” programming and its ties to Norman Lear shows such as *All in the Family* because of this reliance on “the notion of authenticity,” even though *Parenthood* does not aim to “tell the truth about race” and focuses almost exclusively on the problems of a Zeek Braverman and his white middle class family, criteria Lentz connects with relevant programming. (An extended storyline about a reformed African-American youth who dates Haddie in season 3 has been the most overt attempt at tackling issues of race to date.)

To further cement the historical importance of dominant male figures on TV, a study of programming conducted by Nancy Signorielli in 1982 found that men outnumbered women three to one on primetime television network dramas that depicted married, previously married and single characters. In a television study that ran from 1979 to 1985, Thomas Skill, James Robinson and S. P. Wallace also found that primetime network television “tends to reinforce conservative to moderate models of family life” oriented toward the nuclear family and with the father as the head or co-head

of the household, no matter the political or cultural changes in society at the time (Skill and Robinson 449). When considering the way television families reflect the makeup of real world families, Skill and Robinson also found that families headed by both parents have, in fact, been under-represented by television as late as 1990. Also, males are more likely to be the heads of single-parent households on television, vastly over-representing the number of single male fathers in real life, though the gap between single male and female parents on TV has narrowed since 1960 (Skill and Robinson 449). As these studies show, family-centered television programs have a long history in terms of depicting and promoting patriarchal dominance and ideology, explaining why *Parenthood*'s narrative relies so heavily on the show's male characters, specifically its chief patriarch, Zeek. As Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch point out in "TV as a Cultural Forum," domestically-centered sitcoms tracing back to *Father Knows Best* are traditionally the "type of television that reproduces dominant ideology by lulling its audience into a dream world where the status quo is the only status" (565). However, as scholars such as Newcomb and Lentz are quick to point out and my analysis of *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* underscores, much of contemporary television, network or cable, promotes patriarchal discourse and stereotypes whether tethered directly to the domestic family dynamic or not. It is also useful to note that, despite the rise women-centered family shows, there is a continued prevalence of male-dominated family shows on television today.

In *Television Culture*, John Fiske argues that even progressive, "realistic" programs can ultimately underscore patriarchal messages. For example, *Cagney & Lacey*

(1981-1988), a drama most notably studied in terms of its “quality” associated feminism and meaning for women by Julie D’Acci in her book *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, remains in constant contact with the dominant patriarchal ideology even in its feminist depiction of two tough female police detectives. This constant push and pull with patriarchy, according to Fiske, ensures that *Cagney & Lacey* can be both popular and accessible, rather than alienating mass audiences who do not actively decode the show’s feminist message and meanings. More specifically, Fiske writes, “the presence of the dominant ideology and the conventional form of realism through which it works...provide a frame within which such oppositional discourses can be heard and their oppositionality made part of the substance of the drama” (37).

However, viewers’ critical decoding of *Parenthood*’s (or any other show’s) tension between conventionally patriarchal messages and more progressive depictions of family relies on their ability to “read radically, and to give these discourses semiotic priority over the dominant ideological framework” (Fiske 37). The ability of audience members to meet the text and decode its various discourses is key when a show like *Parenthood* or *Cagney & Lacey* operates both conventionally and progressively in ideological message or critique. Realizing that viewers must do this “radical” form of reading is important, but is there evidence that fans actually are decoding *Parenthood* in terms of such a multi-faceted duality? By analyzing reader comments on popular culture blog the *A.V. Club*’s online review of “I Hear You, I See You,” evidence of such reading becomes more tangibly evident.



Each week, *A.V. Club* writer Todd VanDerWerff composes and posts the *Parenthood* review where he recaps the new episode, offers it a grade based on his own subjective view of the episode's success and then participates in the comment section where fans also offer their opinions on the show. While the *Parenthood* segment of the "T.V. Club" is not one of the most active or popular on the site (regularly *The Office* (2005-present), *30 Rock* (2006-present), *The Simpsons* (1989-present) and *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) reviews get the most comments), the comments left under each episode review offer insight as to how some viewers decode the show on a weekly basis. In short, VanDerWerff's review for "I Hear You, I See You" argues that what *Parenthood* does best is invite us into the way of life of a giant, sprawling family. While the first half of the episode feels a bit too "giggly and chaotic," the second half offers a number of winning moments that pack an unexpected punch. For VanDerWerff, every episode has an "elite moment" that perfectly connects with the viewer in terms of tone and emotional realism. In "I Hear You, I See You," for example, he claims that moment is when Haddie and her brother Max have a sleepover together in his room to close the episode. As Max lays in his bunk and raves about getting to eat potato chips in his bed for the occasion, the camera rests on Haddie, whose face and softly falling tears reveal her emotional realization of her special bond with her little brother as she responds to his thoughts and questions. While the series' episodes seem to generally underachieve according to his opinion, the powerful way Katims captures broad familial chaos and the distinct, compelling moments that define our familial relationships and the nuanced emotions therein are what set *Parenthood* apart as a valuable show while establishing

Katims and his team as successful writers. In addition, *Parenthood*'s ability to successfully interweave comedy and drama, balancing more emotional moments with those of levity and joy, such as Zeek clumsily climbing on the roof to "repair" a leaky pipe, make the series even more of a complex and real series. In the end, VanDerWerff gave "I Hear You, I See You" a grade of "B" for its acting, storytelling and emotional resonance, while commenters who are registered with the *A.V. Club* gave the episode a combined rating of "B+."

As the *A.V. Club* ratings attest, fans seemed to generally like "I Hear You, I See You" more than the reviewer, and the comments section below his post provide invaluable insight not only as to why a number of viewers liked the episode but also on their opinion of the series as a whole. For example, a commenter that goes by the name Joey Brisc added to the discussion about "I Hear You, I See You" by writing, "There isn't anything original about this show, but it's the best unoriginal thing to happen to TV." In many ways, this comment speaks directly to the presupposed dual reading of *Parenthood* as both a conventionally patriarchal comedy-drama and also a more progressive, value-rich show. Katims and the producers of *Parenthood* may not be offering the audience any truly groundbreaking narrative material, but *how* they are offering it is so original that it feels superior. In the comment thread that continued from Brisc's, many other readers echo his sentiments, agreeing that they, too, tune in because *Parenthood* is "the best unoriginal thing to happen to TV" (illogicaljoker, *A.V. Club*). Also, many cite the show's small, highly realistic moments as the aspect they like most about the series and weekly episodes. For example, commenter illogicaljoker further

posits that *Parenthood* “does do one thing new—which is to focus on the little details of a family, not the big dramas...in ways that feel less scripted than usual.” This realization is important, because it reveals that viewers recognize Katims’ repeated emphasis on “getting the moments just right” through improvisation and a more naturalistic shooting style. Therefore, at least some invested viewers are decoding the series from what Stuart Hall calls a “*dominant-hegemonic position*” in which viewers read a show’s connoted meanings according to the reference-code in which those meanings have been or are coded (171). By drawing meaning from the series in a relatively non-oppositional way, these viewers are able to understand *Parenthood*’s conventional and progressive connotations in a manner that gives the show applicable value. In other words, such non-oppositional readings allow the show to maintain ties to “authenticity” and remain contemporarily relevant (and vice versa). Commenter haysoos adds, “The crosstalk is what feels very real to me. Coming from a large extended family and having a fairly chaotic workplace environment, those crosstalk moments come all the time for me.” Here, a viewer underscores the importance of the dialogue style in his or her reading of the show as authentic or “real,” which is arguably only heightened by the handheld nature of filming and the connotational code of realism it constructs. This commenter also highlights how bringing personal experience to bear on the series and actively reading in terms of one’s own family dynamic, in the form of personal knowledge of “cultural competence,” also makes the show feel more genuine (33). Overall, the *A.V. Club*’s comments section for “I Hear You, I See You” offers a compelling snapshot of *Parenthood*’s audience reception that, of course, cannot be said to characterize all

viewers of the show, but does reveal that some viewers decode it as simultaneously conventional and quality as well as moment-oriented. But what does this wealth of intelligent, thought-out audience response on the Web say about audience reception in terms of television and technology today?

In short, new media has become an important cultural forum where viewers and fans can discuss and evaluate the media they consume in a more engaged and direct way than in the past. As new media scholar Henry Jenkins points out in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, “older notions of passive media spectatorship” have fallen away in favor of recognizing the power of the media consumer as a creator of meaning and relevant cultural products (3). To further emphasize the power of the viewer, audience reception scholar David Morley in *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* privileges the power of the individual in reading a text rather than the text “speaking” to him or her (137). These complimentary understandings of contemporary viewer power stand in loose opposition to Louis Althusser’s fundamental theory of ideological interpellation and “hailing,” which argues that culture implicates individuals or “subjects” in the dominant ideology simply by means of their unconscious acknowledgement of cultural norms (85). In today’s rich new media climate, fans are able to enact numerous readings of shows like *Parenthood* across multiple platforms, essentially re-encountering the text and/or accounts of it on television, in magazines, on blogs like the *A.V. Club* and on Twitter and Hulu, to name a few. Surely, then, this myriad of transmedia encounters with a single text allows for greater viewer agency in approaching that text, even if the reading performed is aligned with dominant ideology.

Ultimately, all of the paratexts that surround a show and that are encountered by viewers color their perception of the series. These supplementary texts act as filters through which viewers must pass to encounter any given media broadcast (Gray 3), and in today's "participatory culture" (Jenkins 3) the cacophony of viewer response itself, such as that on the *A.V. Club* in regard to *Parenthood*, even acts as another important and meaning-rich paratext. For example, the sheer variety of opinions open and presented for debate about Katims' series, facilitated by *Parenthood*'s combination of style and narrative and inability to offer more than simply compelling "moments," allows viewers agency to pleurably decode program narratives conventionally and also to hone in on the compelling elements or scenes rather than the ideologically determined whole. Because of *Parenthood*'s unique style and filming technique, which both push the traditionally patriarchal narrative to be viewed through a more progressive and "elite" lens, the audience is able to read the series in both conventional and value-rich terms and to regularly evoke the discourses of "quality" and "relevant" TV. Therefore, the forum and authority the Internet and *A.V. Club* provide viewers helps sustain the series as perpetually interesting to decode and discuss, especially in relation to other contemporary family comedies and dramas that straddle the line between "quality" and "relevance."

In many ways, the ABC sitcom *Modern Family* (2009-present) has been similarly discussed as a dually progressive and conservative program after making its debut in primetime the same year as *Parenthood*. For example, although *Modern Family* is the first network comedy hit to focus largely on a gay couple raising a child, it still features an extended family anchored by a primary patriarch. Television critics like the *Wall*

*Street Journal*'s Katherine Rosman have even compared the half-hour sitcom to cable shows with more "edgy sensibilities," like Showtime's *Weeds* (2005-present) and HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-present) (W1). However, in the end, many critics concede that *Modern Family* is, in truth, a conservative show rooted in sitcom history's storied conventions. Just as *Parenthood* has been touted as a "quality" primetime drama that does not stray too far from familial tropes, *Modern Family* remains "quality" tied (mostly thanks to "Best Comedy" awards at the Emmys and Golden Globes) and in constant contact with sitcom norms to present a series that is both relatable and contemporarily viable, which Christine Gledhill would argue is a tactic of compensation for society's "underlying realities of separation and difference" (65). Viewers, as it were, desire to consume programming and narratives that reflects their own ultimately unified yet continually disjointed nature. In the case of *Modern Family*, fans have the opportunity to progressively decode the show based on the numerous social types and ideological discourses presented within the "unif[ied], authoritative voice or viewpoint" of the text as a whole (65). However, viewers are still, at least according to a recent study by media research company Experian Simmons, enacting largely conservative readings of it (Tangalo, "Study Finds").

In addition, both *Parenthood* and *Modern Family* stray from conventional sitcom and drama aesthetics. *Parenthood*, as discussed earlier, uses a cinéma vérité, handheld shooting style while *Modern Family* employs a "mockumentary" style in which characters offer their perspective on the narrative directly to the camera and audience in faux-confessionals. In both cases, unconventional and cinematic aesthetics are used to

simulate realism. However, *Modern Family*, in its seemingly constant slapstick and overblown familial caricatures, does not capture the same affecting realism as *Parenthood* and succeeds more as a conservative parody of contemporary familial and gay relationships than a contemporary parenting handbook. Because *Parenthood* is a fairly conventional familial *drama* grounded in the dominant ideology but viewed through a progressive, naturalistic lens, it allows viewers and fans to see the show as both realistically resonant and progressively valuable in a way other shows have not succeeded.

Once again, and even when discussed in relation to marginally related programming on a different network, the definition of *Parenthood* as a superior television offering returns to the connotational power of aesthetics. Ultimately, it is *Parenthood*'s distinct visual style rooted in filmic form that helps situate the series within the subjective tradition of "quality TV." Striving to categorize and define quality television, TV scholars such as Feuer and Newcomb have repeatedly underscored the cinematic ancestry of contemporary televisual sophistication. Drawing connections between television and the cinematic tradition has been perennially practiced as a means of elevating TV, which is still considered a relatively "low" medium within the interpretive community at large (Feuer 146). Just as HBO's *The Sopranos* has its narrative roots in cinematic classics, like *Goodfellas* (Scorsese 1990) and the *Godfather* (Coppola 1972), the aesthetics of the series as well as other critically acclaimed cable and pay cable offerings, such as AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-present), register more cinematically than televisually in imagery, scope and technique. Similarly, *Parenthood*'s distinctly cinematic visual style elevates the

series from generic primetime comedy-drama to an artistic, sophisticated and, as argued, genuine take on the struggles of the modern American family. As previously mentioned, *Parenthood* can also directly trace its ancestry to film, having been loosely based on the 1989 Ron Howard directed film also titled *Parenthood*. This multi-medium heritage helps further cement *Parenthood* within the discourse of the more artistic medium of film and superior visual artistry associated with the “quality” marker. The fact that *Parenthood* successfully remains in discussion with other more celebrated “quality” television due to its aesthetic style and exists as a highly-rated network show also serves to underscore the way “high culture content” has been borrowed and co-opted by popular culture and brought into a more user-oriented form (Gans 76). Because shows like *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present), *Weeds* and *Breaking Bad* (2008-present) have been able to survive by attracting small but elite niche audiences in competition with major network fare, a show like *Parenthood* can achieve long-term success if able to be read as both compellingly artistic and narratively conventional and relatable, especially in the understated moments that more cinematic storytelling can foreground. *Parenthood*, then, offers a compelling amalgamation of low and high, author-driven culture, that can be associated with elements of both “quality” and “relevance.” For as Herbert Gans points out, “high culture is *creator-oriented* and its aesthetics and its principles of criticism are based on this orientation...the popular arts are, on the whole, user-oriented and exist to satisfy audience values and wishes” (76).

While *Parenthood*’s cinematic style and the frequent privileging of creator Katims’ authorial vision help the series align with more sophisticated, “high” televisual



fare that can attract an audience of cultural elites drawn to “quality TV,” the more subdued and conventional nature of its narrative helps attract an even broader range of viewers and stand as contemporarily “relevant.” According to NBC programming topper Mitch Metcalf, one of the other reasons *Parenthood* has succeeded compared to other programs is that the series has always “felt eminently joinable” (Levine 15). With a number of “narratively complex” (Mittell 29) and hyper-serialized narratives deemed “quality TV” on the air, like *Awake* (2012-present) and *The Good Wife* (2009-present), *Parenthood* has been able to average 8.1 million viewers (Levine 15) as a text that does not require intense engagement to watch but is still valuable to viewers who tune in and widely discuss it in terms of televisual excellence. Critical reception for *Parenthood* has also been generally positive, as the *A.V. Club* review first alluded to. One particularly captivating review by Alessandra Stanley that ran in the *New York Times* right before season one’s second batch of episodes premiered on March 1, 2010 calls the show “unexpectedly compelling” in its ability to “rise above a woefully flimsy format with good writing and [an] exceptionally good [cast]” (C1). Again, superior acting and writing are points of “quality,” but Stanley also specifically admires the “beautifully shot exteriors” (C1) that permeate the series and Adam Braverman’s position as one of the primary advice-givers on the show. Finally, Stanley notes the “more middle-class” canvas upon which Katims and his fellow writers paint the Braverman family and labels the series as a subdued version of ABC’s family drama *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-present). This critical piece again highlights the way *Parenthood* is perceived by critics and viewers as both conventional (middle-class, similar to other prime-time domestic

fare) and enlightened (superior acting, more subtly compelling and better production values). The review also repeatedly alludes to the show's prowess in crafting affecting moments while also appealing broadly as a fairly stock family drama. Why then did Katims other similarly styled, moments-oriented and critically acclaimed show, *Friday Night Lights*, fail to attract the audience size of *Parenthood*, and what can the differences between the two programs tell us about the current state of network television?

While the Katims-written *Friday Night Lights* (*FNL*) offers a similar hybrid of relatable domestic narrative and progressive "quality" tone, the show suffered from early superficial perception by viewers and critics alike as just a "football drama for ESPN types." After actually watching an episode or two and realizing the series' merits, numerous critics tried to champion the cause of *Friday Night Lights*, arguing its value as more than a football show with "low-culture connotations" (Gray 123). This critical push positioned *FNL* as an elite, "quality" drama and actually served to alienate some everyday viewers (Gray 123). *Parenthood*, like *FNL*, has been able to attract both a middle-class family audience and a smaller high-end niche, but in addition, *Parenthood* features a number of recognizable, cult favorite actors both from network and pay-cable TV (Peter Krause starred in HBO's *Six Feet Under*, Lauren Graham starred in the WB-turned-CW hit *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007)). *FNL*, on the other hand, featured relatively no known actors that could attract viewers based on name or reputation outside of those returning from the film from which the show was adapted (Connie Britton as coach's wife Tami Taylor, most notably). *Friday Night Lights* alums are also regularly cast on *Parenthood*, and the series has even introduced *FNL*-related iconography (Crosby wore a

t-shirt for *FNL* football team East Dillon in a recent episode) to subtly draw intertextual connections between the two, reward fans who watch both programs and perhaps push *Parenthood* further into the quality discourse. In the end, the fact that *Parenthood* has been able to achieve both critical acclaim and solid ratings can be accredited to the accessible nature of the narrative as well as paratextual discussions of the show that do not deem it either too well-made, too intelligent for everyday viewers, or too conventional for the elite niche.

While *Parenthood*'s programming time was repeatedly changed on the NBC primetime schedule toward the end of season 2, the show has now cemented a regular place on Tuesday nights at 10pm. Such late-season lineup shifts, however, help reveal the confidence NBC executives have in *Parenthood* as a program both popular and well-crafted enough to retain viewers and even possibly attract new ones to help establish NBC as a ratings winner. Due to the significance of relatable "moments" on the show, the compelling, *vérité* style of filming, and the improvisation employed, *Parenthood* seems to have found a winning formula for attracting a spectrum of audiences – an essential ability in today's postmodern and post-network landscape overflowing with media content. In the end, realistic aesthetics and ultimately conventionally resonant narrative elements encourage fans to read the text in simultaneously progressive and familiar ways. This conflicting duality allows for viewers' greater agency and more "authentic" meaning making, seemingly encouraging favorable reviews by audience members rather than alienating them by being redundant or unflatteringly blatant like other contemporary narratively complex texts. Because "almost any version of the television text functions as

a forum in which important cultural topics may be considered” (Newcomb and Hirsch 565), the *Parenthood* episode “I Hear You, I See You” as well as the various paratexts discussed function as important spaces for viewer meaning making while providing multiple avenues to approach and understand the text. The relatable and quality connoting lens *Parenthood* constructs through improvisation, cinéma vérité styling and stereotypical iconography encourages more modern and progressively positive readings of a fairly traditional text, as analysis of the *A.V. Club*’s comment section indicates. At the same time, new media facilitate more engaged and progressive accounts of cultural products and their effect for all televisual content, including but not limited to *Parenthood*, due to the Internet’s expansive and advanced means of facilitating audience interaction with media texts, their producers and other viewers.

Just as audiences filter their understanding of media through the various paratexts that surround each text, the meaning and understanding of *Parenthood* are mediated through a quality-rich and, as close analysis has shown, more authenticating stylistic lens. While the show’s many paratexts, like trailers, posters, hype, reviews and audience commentary, usually reach only certain audiences, all audience members must encounter *Parenthood* via its consciously cinematic framework. Therefore, Katims and those involved in the creation of the series have found a viable way to present a fresh-feeling, “relevant” family drama that uses conventional patriarchal norms to resonate with the widest audience possible while still offering “quality” moments in narrative and aesthetic.

## Conclusion

“Remember, mediocrity is not a mortal sin.” – Jack Donaghy, singing in NBC’s 2012 “Brotherhood of Man” Super Bowl commercial.

So far, 2012 has not been a banner year for NBC, especially when it comes to the series I have chosen as case studies for the last three chapters. While “quality” is still a term greatly associated with cinematic, intertextual, self-referential and character-driven television due to its mobilization by critics, fans and award shows, it is not a term readily associated with high or even average ratings when it comes to NBC. As of February 2012, both *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* have been targeted by the media as sitcoms greatly underperforming on television, let alone in NBC’s floundering Thursday night primetime lineup. *30 Rock*’s season six episodes have posted an average 1.3 rating in the 18-49 demo, with *Parks and Rec*’s numbers not far ahead (VanDerWerff “Ratings roundup”). In fact, ratings are so bad for the network, NBC has found itself in a tie with fourth place Univision and the CW when it comes to drawing primetime viewers on Thursday night (arguably its most prestigious night of television). But what does NBC’s commitment to the “quality” shows I have analyzed, despite their mediocre at best ratings, say not only about the network, but also the contemporary televisual climate in general?

A brief look at NBC’s latest network-touting commercial, created to air before the 2012 Super Bowl (also on NBC), offers an interesting glimpse at the network’s current discursive construction and perception of its brand within the niche audience-oriented

marketplace. The three-minute spot, which features singing cameos by actors from nearly all of NBC's comedies, dramas, news programs, sports broadcasts and late-night shows, is a visual throwback to a time when "giant, network-wide image campaigns," also known as "mondo" shoots, were part of the TV network status quo (Adalian "A Look Back"). As Josef Adalian was quick to point out in *Vulture* the day after the commercial first aired, the NBC "Brotherhood" spot "immediately took us back to the glory days of network branding campaigns." But rather than overtly claiming that its programming is "quality" as a means of enticing viewers to remain devoted to NBC, the spot sets NBC apart by featuring its series' actors and characters as "just one big, happy (male) family" and positions the network as one firmly tied to and appreciative of the past in terms of the network and culture, specifically musical theater and cinematic musicals, as a whole (Coppie Smith "The Brotherhood of NBC"). The fact that the spot privileges men in rhetoric and populace is perhaps best explained by its airing before the Super Bowl and the patriarchal ideology of sport. Such male-centric "brotherhood" branding is ultimately complicated for a number of reasons, but first it is necessary to dissect the spot to understand the implications it has on my argument about NBC's shows and how they are socially constructed as "quality" in relation to NBC's newest brand strategy.

The "Brotherhood" commercial opens in Jack Donaghy's office from *30 Rock*, a strategy that immediately positions the sitcom as the dominant through-line of the song and dance spot and foregrounds Alec Baldwin as the primary face of NBC. As Erin Coppie Smith points out in an *Antenna* article on the commercial, this immediate foregrounding of Baldwin and *30 Rock* might, especially in light of recent ratings results,

overestimate the series' popularity. Jack, Liz and the TGS team have assembled to watch the Super Bowl when Jack begins to explain that he has asked them all to join him in his office (a very rare request, indeed) because they are all, as it turns out, part of a family. This statement, and the presented notion that those at NBC are "all in this together," cues the start of the commercial's song, begun by Donaghy himself. Jack sings that he has learned "there's one great club that all of us are in," and while Liz referentially ponders to the camera if they are in a Super Bowl commercial due to Jack's strange behavior, the commercial quickly evolves into a series-by-series song and dance number strung together by the "Brotherhood of Man" tune. The casts of *The Office*, *Parks and Rec* and *Community* all get elongated scenes and verses toward the beginning of the spot, and after Liz and Jack discuss "brotherhood" as the reason for America to once again fall in love with the NBC family, the song picks back up, allowing Jack to remind viewers, in song of course, that "mediocrity is not a mortal sin" (though Liz, the only prevalent female in the network promo, quickly disagrees). While the commercial goes on to include the likes of *Today*'s Matt Lauer, Brian Williams of the *Nightly News* and the casts of *SNL* and *Parenthood* (blink and you'll miss them, however) joining in on the "Brotherhood" chorus, Jack's line about mediocrity rings loudly even after the spot's show stopping, "all hands on deck" finale in the iconic 30 Rockefeller Plaza.

In the end, it seems NBC, via the lyrics and imagery presented in this Super Bowl commercial, is banking not only on the iconic nature of its brand, characters, New York headquarters and personalities as the reason viewers will continue to tune in, but also on a sense of pride in supporting a network that, in today's ever-changing media landscape,

still values and honors tradition. At NBC, everyone is part of a “brotherhood – meaning loyalty and trust are tantamount, and, seemingly, men rule. This strategy, which foregrounds the importance of male decision-making, the general value of male viewers and loyalty from the top down at NBC, seems like a no brainer for the network, especially in light of NBC executives’ unwavering commitment to ratings-challenged yet critically lauded series and the network’s practice of keeping stars such as Tina Fey on the network in some capacity for the entirety of their careers. As Copple Smith points out in her analysis of the commercial, NBC seems like a studio in the old Hollywood system, committed to a recognizable family of stars and personalities who stand as enduring representatives of the NBC brand, no matter how mediocre ratings may be. But can this kind of philosophy hold up in today’s over-saturated market that seems destined for a more viable and personalized (Internet) platform?

TV and media reporter Brian Stelter recently wrote a piece for the *New York Times* entitled “Youths are Watching, but Less Often on TV” that sheds light on this issue. In the article, Stelter argues that young people are still watching the same shows as they would on broadcast TV, but they are watching them streaming on the Web or on digital devices rather than on a television set. This is not a revolutionary claim, but it does stand as a necessary reminder in light of NBC’s push for “brotherhood” and “fraternity.” Media, after all, are becoming less bound to specific platforms. So is NBC terribly antiquated in calling for a return to togetherness? Or, is NBC ushering in a new era by urging viewers to remain loyal to the NBC brand no matter where they encounter its media? Stelter writes, “The television industry has been expecting – and dreading the day



– that TV viewing peaks, and then either plateaus or slowly declines in the face of encroaching Internet and phone use.” He goes on to report that “to a child, television shows on the iPad are still television, but to Nielsen, they’re not.” Does NBC realize, then, that TV viewers’ habits are changing and the best strategy is to build brand loyalty via the proliferation of likeable personalities and “quality” shows that may not receive great ratings upon airing but have a longer lifespan as they are encountered across channels and via streaming services such as Netflix Instant? NBC did, after all, run an elaborate, network-spanning commercial perfectly positioned to “go viral” and also have an extended lifespan on the web through social media shares and numerous blog postings.

In each of my three chapters, I looked closely not only at the ways *30 Rock*, *Parks and Rec* and *Parenthood* situated themselves within the “quality TV” discourse according to formal properties, acting and writing, but also how viewers, critics and media members help situate each show as “quality” through the mobilization of certain terms, such as “best,” “superior” and “quality,” via pop culture criticism sites such as the *A.V. Club*. While *30 Rock*’s single-camera style and rampant intertextuality has continued through the show’s sixth season, critical acclaim has waned since the show’s live episode, with some critics even bashing Liz Lemon’s rapid devolution from smart, neurotic woman to incompetent child (Holmes “The Incredible Shrinking Liz Lemon”). Though “Live Show” caused many to re-assess the “quality” nature of *30 Rock* in a positive way, season six has caused some critics and fans to speculate about the lackluster end of the series, perhaps signaled by the ultimate airing of season six’s finale. As previously stated, the “Brotherhood of Man” commercial paratextually places *30 Rock* firmly at the center of

the NBC universe, so what would an end to the sitcom mean for the network, especially since *30 Rock* will (and already does) live on in a variety of syndicated, streaming and viral capacities? Further research is needed to fully investigate not only the legacy a “quality TV” comedy can have once it stops airing new episodes in our media-at-your-fingertips digital age, but also to analyze how genre affects the long-term consideration by viewers and critics of a series as “quality” both in syndication and on the Web. In addition, Baldwin recently let slip that *30 Rock* will perform and broadcast another live episode on April 26, 2012, so what does that say about the success of season five’s “Live Show” and the current state of the NBC sitcom? Will a second attempt lead to similar results in ratings and response?

By all accounts, *Park and Recreation* appeared to be the new NBC comedy darling after overcoming its first season woes, but the show’s low ratings and narrative developments in season four also have critics and fans calling for reform. For example, protagonist Leslie Knope has been accused of transforming from “the only feminist on TV” into a “damsel in distress” according to some critics (Marcotte “Stop the Damsel in Distress Act”). Because Leslie enters into a committed relationship in season four, Amanda Marcotte argues that her character, by default, becomes a passive “anti-feminist” cliché rather than remaining the hyper-competent woman she was in seasons one through three. Marcotte blames the show’s low ratings for Leslie’s character shift, positing that the writers, by giving Leslie a boyfriend, are pushing her into “tedious Hollywood clichés” by making Ben (played by Adam Scott) her frequent rescuer. Marcotte’s piece, however, fails to acknowledge not only the wealth of strong and varied female characters

on *Parks and Rec* (Anne, April and Donna), but also to consider Leslie as a well-rounded “quality” character who cannot be an empowered woman in a committed relationship (as a number of commenters on Marcotte’s article point out). Therefore, while *Parks and Rec* continues to stand out as a well-written sitcom that plays with the aesthetic tropes of reality TV and cinéma vérité, its “quality” status, especially as the show and Leslie’s character continue to grow and evolve in a search for ratings, still requires further investigation. Can a “quality”-labeled comedy like *Parks and Rec* survive simply because it exists as part of the NBC “brotherhood,” and should writers continue to be bound to ratings as benchmarks for success when considering Stelter’s recent Times analysis of youth viewing habits? These are questions worth considering further in order to understand how “quality TV” and “quality” comedies are both socially constructed and internally developed today.

Finally, *Parenthood* has quietly managed to remain both reasonably viable and critically lauded in its regular Tuesday night timeslot. While the series received no major award show recognition in 2011 or early 2012, the *A.V. Club* continues to review weekly episodes with fairly consistent grade results (“B” to “A-“ range), praising the show’s ability to stick to and develop a set number of storylines across season three while also providing viewers a believable, intermittently touching glimpse at contemporary family life. For reviewer Todd VanDerWerff and a number of *A.V. Club* commenters, the show still regularly manages to get intermittent “moments” just right in terms of tone, acting and plot, but a number of viewers continue to view *Parenthood* with Jason Katims’ work on *Friday Night Lights* in mind (YO MAMA “Politics”). Therefore, *Parenthood*

continues to be judged in comparison to its sister text *FNL*, a show which many still consider to be one of the best series to air on a major broadcast network in recent memory and the standard to which all future Katims shows will be held. While *Parenthood* remains an obvious stylistic heir to *FNL* in its handheld, multi-camera filming style (credited to Peter Berg and his Austin, Texas filming crew), for the most part the show has failed to move outside the bounds of white middle-class America to focus on a community as holistically and delicately as *FNL* did via the geographic and economic foils of East and West Dillon. A more in-depth comparison of *Parenthood* and *Friday Night Lights*, outside the parameters of a section of a single chapter, could helpfully illuminate not only the creative boundaries set for each show and how they differ (with *Parenthood* set, written and filmed in California and *FNL* filmed and set in Texas and Katims and the writers working from California), but also how *FNL*'s joint distribution deal with NBC and DIRECTV in its final seasons possibly allowed the show's writers more narrative freedom to construct a "quality" series.

Overall, *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation* and *Parenthood* remain unique and valuable case studies because they continue to be socially constructed as "quality" network TV in a televisual landscape grappling with the rising popularity of streaming technology and the fall of ratings numbers. No longer are scholars and critics simply talking about the dichotomy between pay cable and broadcast network fare. Instead, as viewers and academics we must consider how the continual amalgamation of "high" and "low" culture, specifically when it comes to television, is taking place in a digital sphere where transmedia content is accessible in a more immediate, personalized manner. In the

preface to *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evolution of Taste*, Gans concludes with the thought, “I think everyone should get the culture they want, even if they cannot afford to pay for it” (XV-XVI). If we are already living in a time when (in some cases) people can readily access the culture they want, what are the implications for the future creation of media and how we judge the quality of what is being produced? As television style continues to become more cinematic and the foundational aesthetic markers of “quality TV” become more widespread, what elements will critics, journalists and viewers latch onto when discursively positioning certain content as more valuable than another, and how will the discourse change as more people gain access to programming via their laptops, tablets and smartphones? Will “quality” wane as network structures seemingly become less important? Will traditionally “low” genres such as comedy cement their place in the “quality TV” landscape, or will branding ultimately play the deciding role when it comes to elevating content from mediocrity? These are questions that require ongoing investigation as the televisual landscape continues to evolve across platforms and screens.

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